Lonely Eyes

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Lonely Eyes

by sourweather

Summary

Will's been through ten high schools. Never sticks around for more than half a semester, tops. Now, it's the second semester of his junior year, and between constantly being the New Kid and being ostracized for being Non Verbal, Will can't think of anything worse than dealing with yet another High School.

Until he meets Hannibal Lecter.

Notes

lol I came up with this au and it REFUSED to leave me!!!! My current plan is to update it with a new short chapter every Friday, but we'll see how well I stick to that lol. Anyway enjoy my dumb high school hannigram fic!

Also! I just realized that this is the 150th fic on my ao3 page! So thats awesome!

Eleven

Another fucking locker.

What is it about public school lockers? They never open on the first try, they're always on the opposite side of the building from all of your classes, and it's always impossible to actually keep them clean. No wonder so many students just slide everything into a trash can at the end of the semester and start from scratch after vacation. He's never had the luxury of doing that, but he imagines it's liberating. Just tossing all of your half-full notebooks and broken pencils into the garbage and wiping your hands clean of the past eighteen wasted weeks of your life.

It isn't worth the effort, using a locker. Not for Will, anyway. He takes the sticky note from the counselor, locker number and combination written in messy blue ink, and promptly crumples it up before tossing it. He'll keep all his stuff in his bag, thanks. No point in learning another set of digits for another space that he won't be around to clean out in May anyway.

He misses his first class of the day. Honors English. Too busy getting a 'grand tour' that he is almost entirely ignoring. He nods along, smiles politely when the counselor makes bad jokes, takes note of the locations that are on his schedule. Physics, Phys Ed, Trig. It all blurs together after a while, though. Years and years of beige, forgettable buildings that all morph into one abstract space labeled 'school- misc.' in his mind. Which school had the weird hallway, and which one had the separate building for extracurriculars, and so on. What was the total up to, now? Eight? Ten? No, eleven. This is high school number Eleven. Will's never been in the same one for longer than a term, which is a nightmare, enrollment-wise. Not that he gives a shit if the administration has a field day getting his credits in order. He's just punching the clock, counting down the days until graduation.

It's mutual. The staff wishes he wasn't here, Will wishes he wasn't here either. Even Steven.

Eventually he's led into his health class, where he shakes hands with a teacher whose name he won't commit to memory and waves awkwardly at a group of students who might as well be mannequins. He tries to shuffle toward the back of the room and tuck himself away in a vacant desk, but the teacher stops him.

"Well hold on, Willy! Why don't you tell us a little about yourself so we can get to know you?"

"Um, Mr. Blair," The counselor says, leaning closer to him, lowering her voice to say what they always say:

"Oh, didn't the Principal warn you? Didn't you get the urgent memo, preparing you for this wild inconvenience? Your new student is 'Different', or 'Special', or something to that effect, but not 'Special' enough to get sent to a 'Different' school, so now we have to deal with it- I mean 'him'."

Will plasters a sarcastic smile on his face, addressing the room and raising his hands.

'My name is Will, not Willy, but none of you know or care what I'm fucking saying right now. None of you will ever speak to me, and I can guarantee I won't talk to you, so please do me a favor and forget I exist for the next nine weeks. Thank you and God Bless America.'

He turns to the health teacher, nodding curtly as if to say 'there, happy now?' and shoves his hands into his pockets.

Of course none of them know what he says, they never do. There's some light murmuring in the room as he successfully falls into a corner desk in the back of the room. The girl sitting beside him lifts a brow, clearly amused. She sits back in her chair, blowing a lock of long dark hair out of her eyes. Will tries to tune out the conversation of his peers with limited success. The word 'deaf' gets thrown around a lot, which always happens no matter how many times he displays obviously being able to hear.

Whatever. Sometimes Will wishes he *was* deaf.

At least then he might get sent to a school where he doesn't have to write down notes to ask if he can go to the bathroom.

Three more semesters. That's all. Just three more semesters of this and then he can finally be done with this horseshit.

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It's mid-January, still early in the term, so all of his teachers are still going over the basics. Which means that Will, who has always been ahead of his classmates intellectually speaking, barely has to pay attention. He reaches into his bag, cracks open a book, and lets the hours move miserably by. Soon he'll have homework to worry about, doing the assignments for one class while sitting through another so that he actually has some time to himself after dinner. For now, though, he finds some joy in the gentle monotony. There are worse things in the world than Sisyphean routines, at the end of the day. At least if there's always a Boulder to push, people are less likely to get on your case about being lazy.

This school's student body is even small enough that he finds an empty table at lunch, which is a blessing. Cafeterias are already way too loud for him, sitting at a table full of other kids is akin to a waking nightmare. It's a small relief, but he's learned to be grateful for anything he can get. He's starting to think this term might be relatively painless. As long as everyone just lets him fade into the background, which the universe seems to think is a bigger request than Will does.

There's not just one near-empty table, he realizes, but two. There's another one nearby, with only a single seat taken. A preppy-looking boy, eating by himself, a book of his own open in front of him. The boy looks up at him, making eye contact for just a moment, and Will looks back at the page, praying he doesn't try to come over. He doesn't, thank God, and Will is left to read in peace.

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The walk to the boatyard isn't far, either. And it never gets that cold in the South, so it's relatively pleasant. Another small blessing. A few schools ago, he had to walk for miles every day.

He sets down his bag where it's safe from water or theft, rolls up his sleeves, and crouches beside his Father, already inspecting the busted motor.

"Hey Willy."

Will brings two fingers to his forehead and salutes.

"How was school? First day, what did you think?"

He shrugs.

His dad huffs. "Well, you made good time, that's always a plus. It'll cut less into your work."

Will chews his cheek. Hesitates before whistling. His dad follows the longstanding cue, looks up from his task to watch Will's hands.

'You know, I could get even more work done if you'd just let me drop out and take the GED.'

He shakes his head in exasperation. "How many times are you gonna fight me on this, son? You're staying in school, end of discussion."

'But if I dropped out, then-'

His dad smacks Will's hands, an all-too-familiar silencing that always makes his face burn hot with defiance.

"You're finishing school, Willy," he commands, and Will clenches his hands into fists to keep himself from doing something he'll regret. "You're gonna get good grades, and get your diploma, and you're gonna try to get along with the other kids and be fuckin' normal for once."

Will huffs, stares daggers at the afternoon sun dancing on the water's surface.

'I'm not normal.'

"Yeah, no shit. But you're gonna try to fit in, and that's final. Now stop arguing and put those hands to use."

-

All of the seats in the back of Honors English are taken, so he sinks into a desk close to the door and fishes his book from his bag. This class will be even more of a breeze than the others. Will's loved to read since birth, and thinking critically about literature comes easily for him.

He starts to feel uneasy about ten minutes into class. It takes a moment to pinpoint the feeling, but once he does his shoulders tense on the spot.

He's being watched.

With practiced caution, Will glances around the room. Everyone is ignoring him, as usual- doodling in notebooks or staring into space. There may be one student in the front of the room who is actually listening to the teacher. He turns, looks over his shoulder. It's quick, so quick that he almost doesn't catch it, but Will is observant.

A boy sitting two rows behind him looks quickly down at his notebook, fervently scribbling in an attempt to seem disinterested. Will recognizes him- it's the boy who was sitting at the other empty table at lunch yesterday.

He'd been staring.

Will furrows his brows, turns back to his book.

A minute later, he feels eyes boring into him again. He turns faster this time, trying to catch the other boy off guard. They look at each other for a fraction of a second before the boy's eyes are on his notebook again.

Will huffs, rolls his eyes. Whatever. He wants to stare, let him stare. It's nothing Will isn't used to.

He sinks a little further into his chair, either way.

Please, please don't try to pick a fight. Not again. Why can't everybody just leave him alone?

He's braced for impact in the hallways, waiting for the boy to show up. To knock him over, steal his backpack, call him a freak. Maybe he'd get into a fight in his first week, set a new personal record. It never happens. Even at lunch, when he sits down at the empty table, the other boy is in the same spot as he was the day before. Will catches him looking at him from the corner of his eye a few times, but for the most part they both just read.

It becomes part of his routine, for the next few days. Come to school, try to read while the creepy boy in his English class stares at him, do homework until classes are over, go to work, go home with Dad, do chores, eat dinner, read until he falls asleep. Rinse and repeat.

When it becomes clear that the boy isn't going to bully him but also has no plans on stopping, the staring starts to get on his nerves. He wants to change seats, but all the ones behind the boy are taken. He hates feeling like people are watching him, judging him, thinking about how weird he is. He glares at the boy over his shoulder. The boy just keeps scribbling in his notebook. What is he doing?

A full week has passed by the time Will's had enough. When the bell rings, he rips a piece of paper out of his notebook, scrawls a message in pencil, and walks up to the other boy's desk. Slams it down face-up. The boy stops gathering his books, tilting his head as he regards the note.

'Stop staring at me.'

Will keeps his face stern, jaw clenched. He's not afraid of this boy. If he wants to fight, so be it. His dad will be pissed, but Will's no stranger to that, either. Maybe he'll finally let him drop out, if he gets in trouble this quickly.

The boy looks up at Will. Meets his eye. Will fights to keep from looking away. He hates eye contact.

Slowly, the boy curls his right hand into a fist. Will braces himself.

He moves the fist in a circular motion over his chest, a small smile on his lips.

'I'm sorry.'

Will freezes.

A girl knocks shoulders with him as he brushes past, making a beeline for the door. The boy just smirks.

'See you at lunch, Will,' the boy signs, and before Will can think to reply, he's finished gathering up his books and is headed for his next class.

Will shakes himself, shoving his things into his backpack. He rushes out of the classroom, hoping he won't be late for his next class.

Maybe this school won't be so boring, after all.

Poltergeist

Chapter Notes

I love Will so much I want to hold him

He's still reeling a little when he falls into his desk at the back of Health Class. That was certainly...new. He hasn't met many people in his life who can sign. Most schools- including this one- don't offer ASL as an elective, and Will is just far enough on the correct side of 'High Functioning' to get by in Public Schools, though he suspects his dad would insist he go to a 'normal school' regardless. Meeting another person who seemed to have at least basic ASL knowledge was definitely unexpected, but exciting. Very exciting. Such that he has to clasp his hands together under his desk to keep from stimming.

His knees are bouncing all the same.

Still, he tries to temper his excitement. That boy hadn't approached Will of his own volition, in fact Will hadn't seen him interacting with anyone all week. He just sits, and scribbles in his notebook, and stares. Will thought- still thinks- he's kind of creepy.

Then again, Will wasn't exactly a social butterfly. He just sits quietly by himself, too. Albeit with less staring.

And even if he is creepy, he's a creepy kid who could actually *understand* him. Maybe.

Only one way to find out.

He's pulled from his thoughts by a fist knocking a shave-and-a-haircut rhythm into his desk. When he glances up, the girl who usually sits beside him is standing over him.

"Hey," she says, loud and slow. She moves her mouth very precisely, exaggerating her speech. "My name is Beverly. You're Willy Graham, right?"

Will rolls his eyes, pulls a worn spiral notebook from his bag. He jots down a reply and turns the notebook toward the girl.

'It's Will and I'm not deaf.'

She chuckles like she finds his irritation amusing, falling into the desk beside him. "Yeah, guess I should've figured that. I thought maybe you read lips or something."

Will just shakes his head, leaning to pull his half-finished math homework from his bag.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to talk to anyone," Beverly says, apparently taking Will's silence as an invitation to say more. "Whole school's full of bitches. I mean, some of them are cool, but they're still bitches."

Will snorts, and this time he tears a scrap of paper out of his notebook and hands it to her.

'Every school I've ever been to is full of bitches, and I don't talk because I can't, not because I don't want to.'

Beverly arches a brow when she reads the note. "How many schools have you been to?"

'High schools? Eleven, now. Before that, I wasn't really keeping score.'

She chokes. "Wait, *eleven?* That's insane!"

Will scrawls his response, and Beverly is patient as he writes. It's a patience that he isn't usually afforded.

'I'm on pace for sixteen by the time I graduate,' he passes back, feeling oddly smug about how surprised she is.

She shakes her head. "Jesus. And they *all* sucked?"

Will nods. **'100% bitch populations, every single time'**

She laughs, scooting her desk a little closer. "So what brings you here? I mean, people don't come to this school by *choice,* you end up here."

'My dad and I move around a lot.'

Beverly's dark eyes go wide with wonder. "So you've been all over the country, then? I can count the number of times I've been out of this *zip code* on like, my hands and one foot!"

Will shakes his head, huffing out a soft laugh. **'Just up and down the Mississippi, mostly. We work on boats, so we stick close to rivers. My last school was in Cedar Rapids.'**

She grins. "That's so cool."

He shrugs, watching as the teacher stands and the volume of chatter gradually falls.

"When I graduate, I'm moving North," she says more softly. "Somewhere where it snows in the winter, and there's actually shit to do. You know we don't even have an arcade? All the kids in this town do is just hang out in empty parking lots and give each other handjobs in the graveyard."

Will laughs, louder this time. Their teacher gives him a sharp look and he feels heat creep up his neck. He looks down to his homework, rhythmically tapping the eraser end of his pencil against his desk. After a moment, he glances over. Beverly is smirking, half-heartedly jotting down notes.

When the teacher has his back turned, writing something that'll likely be on the test in big letters on the chalkboard, Will tosses a folded slip of paper onto Beverly's desk. She casts him a mischievous glance when she unfolds it.

'Why not just give handjobs in the parking lot? Free entertainment for the corpses?'

Bev snickers. She clicks the back of her gel pen a few times before writing another message in small, neat handwriting and passing it back.

'If they're stuck in this town for eternity, the ghosts deserve the occasional peepshow.'

He smiles to himself. **'It's better than when I lived in Wisconsin. Nearest movie theater was a forty-five minute drive and every time you went to the bathroom someone was smoking menthols in the stall.'**

"Bev, Willy- got something you'd like to share with the class?"

Will freezes, the note folded in his outstretched hand halfway between their desks.

Beverly shakes her head. "No, sir. Sorry."

Their teacher looks at her, then at Will, and sighs. "Pay attention. This is your only warning."

He swallows, nods and looks back down at his work, crumpling the note in his hands sheepishly.

A few minutes pass, and another folded piece of paper lands square in the middle of his notebook.

Will smiles.

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'Hello, Will.'

Will nods to the other boy, fists balled up at his sides as he fights the need to fidget. He was curious about the boy, but hadn't quite worked up the courage to confront him again after being knocked off balance that morning. The excitement he felt before has been cooled into a thrum of anxiety that writhes uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach.

He almost abandons the whole endeavor and walks back to his own empty lunch table. He can't quite coax his legs into moving, but he can't seem to sit down at the other boy's table either, so he just stands, looking down at him like a picture of teen awkwardness.

'Hannibal, right?' he signs, recalling the other boy's name from their English teacher checking attendance.

Hannibal nods, simply watching Will with a neutral expression.

Will takes a breath, rocks backwards onto his heels and then forward again.

'So, you know ASL?'

'Fluently, yes.'

Will nods, taking note of the fact that the other boy is still signing. *'I've never met another kid who knew it before.'*

'Most schools in this area don't teach it. My uncle and I learned it together.'

He furrows his brows. *'It's nice that you can understand me, but you don't have to use it with me. I can hear.'*

Hannibal smiles up at him, and Will focuses on his hands to avoid meeting his eye.

'So can I.'

He pauses. *'Are you nonverbal?'* He signs slowly, feeling a bit foolish for even asking, even hoping that someone else at this school might be the same as him.

Hannibal shakes his head, and the disappointment is palpable.

'I'm mute. There's a difference.'

Will nods. Not the same, but similar. *'Have you always been mute?'*

The other boy crosses his legs, taking a plastic container of food from his lunch box. It looks fancy, but also distinctly homemade. Without looking up, he places two fingers of his left hand over two of his right, brings his fists together, and points to himself.

'Sit with me.'

He swallows. Hesitates before signing back. *'I don't really socialize much.'*

Hannibal smirks. *'Why not? God forbid we become friendly.'*

'I don't make friends.'

'You could,' the other boy insists.

'I don't find you that interesting,' Will responds immediately. It's not entirely true, but something about Hannibal makes him feel oddly cornered, defensive.

He looks up at Will then, searching for his eyes. Will meets him halfway, sparing a glance for the self-assured curve in his lips. Hannibal nods to the vacant seat across the table from him.

'You will.'

-

'I met another kid who can sign at school today.'

His dad huffs, nearly elbows deep in grease as he attempts to loosen a stubborn screw. "Principal said there weren't any other autistic kids there."

'He doesn't have Autism. At least, I don't think he does.'

The screw finally pops free, and his dad turns to look at him. "Well what did you talk about?"

Will shrugs. *'Not much,'* he signs, which is true. After insisting that he didn't want to be friends, Will sat across the table from Hannibal and they both spent lunch reading in silence. Every few minutes, Will caught himself glancing up to look at him and would find Hannibal glancing back, but he tried to shrug it off.

His dad makes a noncommittal noise.

'...I met a girl, too.'

He lifts a brow. "Did you?"

Will nods.

"What's her name?"

'Beverly. She sits beside me in Health Class.'

"She talked to you?"

He nods again.

"She pretty?"

Will looks down, feels his ears go pink. *'I guess so, yeah.'*

His dad laughs, clapping him on the shoulder. "Alright! Knew you had it in ya, Willy! Here, hold that flashlight for me, yeah?"

He obeys, shining a ray of light into the darkness of the engine. His dad chuckles again.

"See I told you, all you've gotta do is try to fit in. Can't just hide away reading ghost stories all the time."

Will wants to respond, but he bites his tongue and holds the flashlight in place instead.

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It's ten o'clock at night when Will creeps his way into the kitchen. He holds his breath as he opens the cabinet, cringing when the hinge squeaks. His dad is a heavy sleeper, but Will never lets himself get too cocky. He grabs the peanut butter from the shelf, leaving the cabinet open so that he doesn't have to open and close it again to put the jar away.

The anatomy of this hotel room suits Will better than many have in the past. The kitchen area- which in truth isn't much of a 'kitchen' considering its lack of an oven or stove- is on the

opposite side of the room from the bedroom, and the bedroom itself has its own door which his father keeps perpetually closed. It's easier to find moments of privacy, of agency, especially on nights where his father drinks a few too many and passes out before midnight.

Nights like tonight, which afford Will an opportunity to fish a jar of raspberry jam from the fridge without looking over his shoulder.

He grabs a plastic knife from their assorted bag of disposable cutlery, chest tightening at the rustle of plastic that feels louder than a gunshot in his ears. The plastic that surrounds their loaf of bread is quieter, though.

He sits on the pull-out sofa, legs crossed beneath him, a glass of milk in one hand and his sandwich in the other. Another blessing, this pull-out couch. They never stay in rooms with more than one bed, which usually leaves Will's lanky frame to curl awkwardly on whatever uncomfortable couch the room is fitted with. Not this time. For once he's able to stretch his legs, roll over in his sleep, spread out wide and take up space. His neck is still sore most mornings, but he still has phantom back pains from that one hotel in Missouri that only had a loveseat, so he takes this gladly.

Ordinarily, he takes this time to curl up with a good book and read until his eyelids grow heavy. It suits him just fine, reading. It's fun, it's private, and most importantly, it's silent.

He chews his bottom lip, glancing up at the small television before him. He knows he shouldn't, that it'll probably wake his dad, and he'll get in trouble if he wakes up and catches Will watching TV in the middle of the night.

The TV Guide sitting on top of the television mocks him from afar. He shouldn't have been looking through it to begin with, he knew damn well that he didn't have time to watch TV between work and school, but he'd been curious.

Poltergeist is on tonight.

He eyes the clock. He'll only have missed a few minutes. Will listens carefully and hears snoring in the bedroom. Maybe his dad won't wake up.

Will sets his jaw. He gingerly places his meal on the coffee table, moving quickly in socked feet across the floor to grab the remote. Steels his nerves.

He presses the mute button as soon as the television comes to life, but the commercial playing still fills the room with a half-second of noise. He freezes. Holds his breath for one second, two. His dad snores again and Will relaxes. It only takes him a few moments of fiddling with the settings to turn on the closed captioning, and then he switches over to the channel he'd seen listed in the guide.

Will settles again, eyes wide as he takes in the film. He loves horror, always has, since his dad let him watch *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* when he was definitely too young to watch it. There's just something about it, something he can't quite define. He loves it.

He eats quickly, as always, and watches the screen. For a few dark hours, the world shrinks down to only Will, and the television, and the silence all around him. No one to watch, or judge.

He feels alone, which is a very familiar feeling for Will. But he feels alone in a good way for once.

Pair Up

Chapter Notes

I love these boys so. much...

Days pass, as they're known to do. Will keeps his head above water. He balances work and school and what little time he can carve away for himself. Bev makes jokes with him, Will writes his replies down and she waits until he's finished without rushing him. The conversations are stilted. They always are, they always will be. But it's nice that she wants to talk with him.

Hannibal still stares.

Less so at their now shared lunch table, where he mainly spares Will a peek up from his pages here and there. An odd sort of truce has formed between them. Will doesn't know why he sat with Hannibal a second, third, fifth time, but he did. He strode into the cafeteria and, casting a short nod Hannibal's way, dropped his bag on the table and sat across from him. It doesn't make any difference, he reckons, whether he's sitting at an empty table or with Hannibal. The other boy doesn't talk- can't or won't? Doesn't talk, so Will can still distance himself from the chatter all around him. The noise still irritates him, but it's fine.

No, it's during their English class that Hannibal chooses to stare. Even though Will asked him not to. Well, 'asked' may be generous- he demanded that Hannibal stop staring. Every day, Will considers confronting him about it. Insisting that Hannibal leave him alone. Every day he almost tells the other boy off for judging him, when Hannibal himself should know how it feels to be looked at like that. Every day, he sits down across from Hannibal and wonders why he doesn't just sit alone.

He's done wondering. He doesn't want to be friends with Hannibal Lecter. He doesn't want to be friends with Beverly Katz either, for that matter. They're all temporary, anyway. Gone tomorrow, here today, not worth learning or knowing or seeing beyond silhouettes in his periphery. The flavor of the month.

The only constants are himself, and his father, and words on pages.

He sinks further into his seat when the teacher announces that the class will be doing a discussion in pairs today. If he was in the back, maybe he could just fade into the background, not be seen. God, he hates when teachers do this. Sometimes if a class has an odd number of kids, he can get away with working alone. Or at the very least he's lumped in with two other students who just talk with each other and ignore Will entirely. This class has an even number, he's fairly certain of it. He's been ignored in those circumstances, too, from

time to time. The last kid standing just joins up with another pair, and Will is avoided like a leper, and everyone is better off for it.

In hindsight, maybe he should've tried to pair up with someone else.

"Will?"

Will looks up from his book at his teacher, praying she'll take pity on him.

"Go ahead and sit with someone, I want you to discuss the reading."

Will tries and fails to look her in the eye, wishing he could sink through the floor. *Come on, lady. You don't get paid enough to care about this. I don't get paid at all.* He shakes his head at her.

She's quiet and for a moment, Will thinks he's stricken a chord with her. Appealed to her ethos enough to be left to his own devices.

Then she leans closer, speaking softly, coaxing.

"Hannibal doesn't have a partner yet," she says, and Will clenches his jaw. "You don't want him to be left out, do you?"

Will rolls his eyes. He hates being talked down to like that. He's sixteen, he's not a child. He glares across the way at Hannibal and yes, he still isn't paired off with anyone.

The teacher casts a patronizing 'thank you' his way as Will falls into a seat beside Hannibal, not even looking at the other boy before reaching into his bag for a physics worksheet that's due tomorrow. He sees Hannibal's hands move in his periphery, knows that it's the now-familiar 'hello, Will' that he sees every day. Will doesn't acknowledge it.

It's difficult to focus. He needs to stay ahead on his assignments, but his attention is being pulled in ten different directions right now. All around him, his classmates are talking. Some of them are actually discussing the reading. Most of them aren't. At the head of the class, the teacher lifts her brows at him, giving him a pointed call to action.

Will looks over to Hannibal, his attention focused on his notebook. He peers over the other boy's shoulder.

It's a drawing. An unfinished drawing, but still leagues above anything Will can do. A butterfly, perched on a flower. Will watches Hannibal smudge his marks with a small white tool, blending it in with the rest of the drawing before setting it down.

'You're staring.'

Will leans away, heat prickling at his ears. *'You stare at me every day,'* he counters, wishing he didn't feel so embarrassed. *'I told you to knock it off.'*

'You did.'

He grits his teeth. *'So stop.'*

'I don't want to.'

Will looks up from his hands to his face at that. Hannibal is smiling.

'Did you do the reading, Will?'

He's still for a moment, struggling to keep his footing. When it passes, he nods.

'I try to stay ahead on all of my schoolwork, so I read the whole book the night it was assigned. You?'

'I've read Pride and Prejudice before. I remember it well enough to get by without a refresher.'

Will nods, resisting the urge to awkwardly drum on the desk.

'What did you think of it?'

He shrugs. *'Not something I'd read by choice.'*

'And what do you read by choice?'

Will frowns at Hannibal. The other boy is turned in his seat to face him, drawing entirely abandoned. He glances around at the rest of the class, everyone else having animated conversations. He turns, too, their knees almost knocking from newfound proximity.

'...I like horror, mainly,' he signs. *'Horror, and mysteries.*

'I've never felt drawn to horror fiction. You must enjoy it, though. That or you're reading a dozen stories at once- I almost never see you carrying the same book two days in a row.'

Despite himself Will smiles at that, nodding sheepishly. *'I read all the time, yeah. And I'm fast, so it doesn't take me long.'*

'I should ask you to loan me a few favorites, then, since you're so experienced in the genre.'

'Oh, I don't keep them.'

Hannibal falters, and Will realizes a moment too late that he just missed a cue.

'I mean, I check them out in batches at the library on my days off. I go there every Sunday morning and pick some out.' He reaches for his notebook and a pen, holding the end of the pen between his teeth as he signs *'I could write down some good ones for you, if you want to check them out for yourself.'*

When he glances up at Hannibal, pen still hanging from his lips as he flips to a blank page, the look on the other boy's face makes something shift in his chest. The heat returns with a vengeance, this time settling on his cheeks.

'I'd like that. Thank you.'

He nods, quickly jotting down five titles and trying to swallow around the odd excitement he feels. No one's ever taken an interest in his hobbies before. It must be that.

He rips the page from his notebook and hands it to Hannibal, already eager to hear what the other boy thinks. Hannibal gently folds the page and tucks it into his binder. Will is signing before Hannibal is even looking. He can't help it- the proverbial door has been cracked open and everything wants to come flooding out.

'And if you like that second one on the list- The Exorcist- there's actually a movie based on it, too. Some people say it's just as good, but I don't know if I'd agree with that. But it's very controversial- the little girl in it actually got death threats for acting in it and had to go off the grid for like a year, so-'

"I'm going to trust that the two of you are talking about *Pride and Prejudice,"* their teacher says, now hovering near their desks. Will nods, face flushing, and she moves on to scold some other groups for straying off topic.

When Will looks at Hannibal again, he can't stop himself from laughing, and Hannibal chuckles too.

'Lately I've been reading a lot of poetry,' Hannibal signs.

Will blows out a breath. *'I never could get into that.'*

'Poetry is best enjoyed when it's read aloud,' he concedes. *'But I still enjoy it.'*

He furrows his brows. *'...I don't think I've ever had someone other than a teacher read to me before.'*

'No? Not even your parents?'

Will freezes. Looks down at his hands. Shakes his head, slowly. He hopes Hannibal won't pry, he doesn't want to talk about his home life. He braces himself when Hannibal's hands start moving.

'They have books on tape at the library, too, you know. You could check one out and see how you like it.'

His smile rises again easily. *'Yeah, maybe I will.'*

The bell rings, then, and Will feels more disappointed than he'd expected. He wanted to keep talking.

'I guess I'll see you at lunch, yeah?' he signs nervously, the sound of their classmates packing up and filing out roaring all around them.

'I'm looking forward to it.'

Will nods, standing and collecting his bag. He only pauses when Hannibal clears his throat.

'If I stop looking at you during class, will you feel more comfortable talking to me?'

Will sighs. He hates being watched, but it really doesn't seem like Hannibal means anything malicious by it. *'Why do you stare at me, anyway?'*

Hannibal watches the last of their classmates leave the room and reaches for his sketchbook. He flips to a page, tears it out gently, and passes it to Will with a small smile. Once again, he's gone before Will finds his words.

The Will in the drawing is disinterested, frowning down at an open book. His curls fall around his face, hanging near his chin. His eyes are downcast, long lashes casting small shadows on the apples of his cheeks. His lips are drawn tight in focus.

Will stares down at the drawing for so long that he barely makes it to his next class on time. When he finally finds his seat, he studies it again, like he can't believe what's in front of him. Yes, that's definitely Will in the drawing. Yes, that signature in the corner indicates that Hannibal Lecter drew it. Yes, Hannibal had been staring and scribbling for two weeks because he'd been drawing Will, of all people.

It's an impressive likeness, though Will finds himself thinking that the version of him in the drawing is a good deal better looking than his actual appearance.

"Hey Will!"

Will flips the drawing over when Bev sits beside him, face going hot. He nods to her in greeting, glancing nervously at the page on his desk.

He frowns, tilting his head as he looks closer.

There are a few lines scrawled on the back of the page, rushed like Hannibal hadn't expected anyone to see it.

My nerves are turned on. I hear them like musical instruments. Where there was once silence-
the drums, the strings are incurably playing.

Cephalus

"I like your shirt."

Will perks up immediately at that, squaring his shoulders and adjusting his flannel so the print is on better display before quickly writing his response. He still can't believe how lax the dress code is here, but if a school will let him roam the halls with a chainsaw plastered across his chest, he's damn well gonna do it.

'I found it at a thrift store in Iowa for like a buck!'

Bev smiles at him. Their teacher finished his lecture early, so they have a few minutes to just talk before the bell rings. "It's a good flick. Haven't seen the sequel yet, though."

'Neither have I, but the first one is incredible, especially with how bare-bones production was. Did you know they used so much fake blood that Bruce Campbell had to go home from shoots lying in the bed of a pickup truck?'

She snorts. "Yeah, guess you can't shower before leaving when your set is like, the woods."

Will is already writing more, thrilled to share. **'And his shirt got so soaked in it that it literally broke when it dried. Not ripped, broken.'**

"It's about two sizes too big for you, you know," she says, smirking good-naturedly. "You look like a kid in it."

He swallows. Tugs at the sleeve of his flannel.

'They used really intense contacts for the Deadites, too. The actors couldn't wear them for more than a few minutes.'

Bev rolls her eyes. "You're *really* into this monster makeup shit, huh?"

Will shifts awkwardly in his seat, skin prickling with embarrassment. He has a tendency to get overly excited about these things. She reaches out and squeezes his shoulder, and he flinches.

"Sorry," she says, pulling away. "I mean, it's cool that you're into it."

He nods, but his original enthusiasm is gone.

"...Hey. Do you um, have any classes with Brian Zeller? Or Jimmy Price?"

He frowns at her, shrugging his shoulders. He really doesn't pay attention to names.

"Well, they're both kind of cool, if you do. They're really into the whole sci-fi thing? Star Wars, or Star Trek or...something, I don't really know. But I know they both watched that

Alien movie, if you're into horror like that." She chuckles. "Scared 'em shitless, but they thought it was good."

Will casts her a sheepish smile.

'You know the Xenomorph in that movie wasn't even special effects or anything? The creature actor they used is 6' 10" without the suit.'

She grins, reassuring. "I'll forward that info, they'll probably think that's cool."

Immediately, he wants to jot down more trivia for her to pass along, but then the bell is ringing and he has to pack up his things.

"Hey, you have Trig next period, right?" She prods, and when Will nods she says "I have Pre-Calc, I'll walk with you."

They move through the hall, Bev's backpack slung over one shoulder and Will's binder held close to his chest. Bev keeps speaking, and Will doesn't really mind that he has to just listen.

"It sucks that you have fourth period lunch, you know. Zeller, Price and I all have third- you could hang out with us."

Will shrugs. He doesn't really like the idea of sitting with a bunch of other kids at lunch, but he can't deny that it feels good to hear her offer companionship.

"Well if you ever have some time to kill after school we usually hang out for a bit. Z doesn't have a car and Jimmy failed driver's ed, so I drive them both home and they pay me back in the form of free onion rings over at Frank's Diner."

He huffs a laugh at that.

"You drive?"

Will shakes his head. He *can* drive, and does from time to time, when his dad needs him to, but for the most part the old pickup truck is strictly off-limits.

"Well if you ever wanted to tag along with us, I could drive you home after."

He glances over at her. She's staring straight ahead, focused on weaving through the wave of other students crashing all around them. Like the offer is nothing worth fussing over. He smiles.

And then someone shoulder checks him from behind.

Will stumbles, his binder falling from his grasp. Stray pages skitter across the tile floor, and he winces when he sees a scuffed sneaker leave a grey imprint on his math homework.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" Bev says above him.

Will looks up as he moves to collect his binder and sees two other students above him. A boy and a girl, both of them reeking of higher social status. The boy looks down his nose at Will, already turning to continue on his way.

"Freak."

Beverly kneels beside him, grabbing papers and shuffling them into a somewhat orderly stack.

"Fucking Vergers," she mutters, shaking her head. "Don't worry about them, Will. They're just a couple of spoiled *dickheads* with no manners."

She makes a point to raise her voice on the insult, though the boy doesn't appear to notice. The girl with him looks over her shoulder at him, an unpleasant look on her face. Not quite pity or remorse, but the detached sort of discomfort one might feel at seeing a dead deer on the side of the road. When Will looks back at her, she turns away.

Maybe it should bother him more than it does. Maybe it's pathetic that he's used to it by now. Maybe a miserable little piece of him is pleasantly surprised that it took this long for someone to go out of their way to pick on him, rather than favoring silent avoidance and hushed gossip.

"Woah, is this you?"

Will redirects his attention back to Beverly, staring down at the page at the top of her stack. It's Hannibal's drawing. The back of his neck goes hot, and he nods, holding out a hand to take it back.

"It's so good! Did you draw this? Can you draw me next?"

Will rolls his eyes, shaking his head as he leans over and taps on the signature in the corner.

Bev freezes.

"...Hannibal Lecter gave this to you?" she asks, and a look of concern paints her features.

Will nods. All around them, other students are rushing to make it to class on time. It occurs to him that the two of them need to get moving, before they're late. Something in Beverly's face makes him stay knelt on the floor.

"You've been hanging out with Hannibal Lecter?"

He shrugs, eyes fixed once more on the drawing, observing the soft shading around his lips.

Bev sighs. "Look, I don't want to boss you around, but...just be careful who you make friends with here, okay? You seem like a nice guy, I don't want to see you getting involved with anyone shady."

Will frowns at her. He wants to ask her to clarify, to figure out how exactly Hannibal is shady, but then she's placing the pages in his waiting hands and standing quickly. "Come on, you're

gonna be late for Trig."

The spell breaks, then, and Will is up and following behind her, half-running through the nearly empty hallway.

-

The soft knock on their lunch table draws Will's attention away from his book. Will glances up, watching hands with long, nimble fingers speak to him.

'May I ask you something, Will?'

He nods.

'Is there a reason that you don't eat during lunch?'

Will sighs, tucking a worn cardstock bookmark between the pages. One of those ugly ones they give out for free at the library, printed with a generic background of space and the words **'Reach for the Stars!'** in big yellow letters.
'Would you eat the food they serve here? I'm not gonna pay for that shit.'

Hannibal seems to consider this. *'So you eat when you get home?'*

'When I'm finished with work for the day, yeah.'

'And when is that?'

Will narrows his eyes. *'Why the sudden interest in my eating habits?'*

Hannibal shrugs in a show of innocence. *'Curious, that's all. I've never seen you eat, it made me wonder.'*

Will lets it slide, and Hannibal returns to his lunch. He scans the cafeteria from their isolated corner of the room, frowning at the tables full of his peers. There, at a table near the window, he sees the two kids who harassed him earlier.

He whistles, quick and low, grabbing the other boy's attention.

'Do you know those kids over there?'

'Which ones?'

Will nods in the direction of the window. *'I think I heard someone call them "Vergers"?'*

Hannibal frowns, chewing as he thinks. *'Only by reputation, I'm afraid. Mason Verger and his older sister, Margot. They come from a wealthy family, so I've heard. I've never interacted with them, much. Though the students here all give me a wide berth.'*

From across the room, Margot Verger glances at Will. This time, Will looks away first.

'Why is that?' He asks, Beverly's words still picking at the fabric of his mind like the tines of a fork through carpet.

'The same reason you prefer to mutually ignore them, I imagine.'

Will snorts. *'I'm as alone as you are.'*

'I'm not alone,' Hannibal argues with a small smile. *'You are right beside me.'*

He shifts awkwardly under the implication, anxious for a reason he can't quite place. He hesitates before he signs again.

'...That drawing of me was really good,' he says, staring resolutely at the table.

'I'm glad you liked it.'

He bristles. *'I didn't say I liked it.'*

'Did you?'

Will huffs. He still hasn't decided. No one's ever drawn a portrait of him before. No one's ever taken the time to *look* at him like that, with so much interest and attention. It's new. Whether it's a good sort of new or a bad sort is still up for debate.

'I didn't like feeling watched for two weeks,' He signs at last, because he isn't sure how else to reply.

'Would you have let me study you, if I'd told you that I was drawing you?'

Will's eyes flick up to the other boy's face. Hannibal lifts a brow in challenge. He sighs, shakes his head.

'I thought not. I'd rather ask for your forgiveness than your permission, in this case.'

He frowns. *'Why me?'*

When Hannibal responds, it's casual, like he thinks nothing of it.

'You have very appealing features.'

Will feels his face go red. He chokes. Did Hannibal just call him... cute?

Hannibal elaborates before Will can string together a sentence. *'You remind me of a model in many paintings by the French artist Pierre-Narcisse Guérin. I'm an avid fan of his work, so your appearance caught my attention immediately. Here, I may have an example,'*

He grabs his messenger bag from where it's hanging from the back of his chair and Will watches, still a bit dumbfounded, as He pulls a large Art History book from inside.

When he slides the open volume to sit before him, it's opened to an image that takes up most of the page. The painting in the book features a topless woman, holding floral garlands above

a naked man, reclining on a cloud. The man looks pretty, as far as men go, with pink lips and pale skin and long brown curls like his own. He looks at the caption. **Aurora and Cephalus, 1810.**

Will observes the image for a moment, thinking over Hannibal's words. Not necessarily that the other boy found him attractive by his own merit, then, simply that Will resembled a figure from an undeniably well-made and aesthetically pleasing painting. Of course. That made much more sense.

'I see what you mean,' he replies at last, feeling more than a little awkward. He almost asks about the lines written on the back of the drawing, their significance. In the end, he can't seem to make himself draw attention to them.

'Are you angry with me?'

Will looks up at Hannibal. He looks a bit nervous, eyes trained on the painting in the book rather than looking back at Will.

'No,' he answers at last. *'It's okay, I guess.'*

Hannibal nods, taking the book back and moving to hide it away again.

'Do you...do you have more drawings like that?'

Hannibal nods, and Will offers up a small smile.

'Maybe you could show some to me, if you want.'

The other boy answers with a toothy grin, white and sharp and just the slightest bit intimidating, like it teeters on the edge of bearing fangs.

Frankenstein

Chapter Notes

> sorry for the lack of update last week! it was Christmas eve, and I was having trouble juggling everything. but I'm really excited about this chapter, so hopefully you'll think its worth the wait! <3

It's a long walk to the library from their hotel. Not too chilly, still enough to warrant a denim jacket. If they end up haunting this town through winter and into spring, the walk might become a highlight of his week- cutting through a residential area, peeking in the windows of thrift stores and music shops. Come April there might even be flowers blooming. As Will entertains the idea of delicate Queen Anne's Lace dotting the sidewalk, he arrives at his destination. He sets down his fishing pole and his tackle box near the front steps. A part of him is always worried someone might come along and steal them, just sitting there unattended, but then again they aren't exactly valuable.

It's colder in the library than it is outside, even this early in the morning. Or maybe it just feels that way because of the lack of sunlight. Will finds himself imagining how good it would feel, coming into the sanctuary of the library after a walk across town in the summer heat. He tries to banish the thought as soon as it rises. No point in wondering, he'll be god-knows-where by summer, either way. Now, though, it's bracing. Quiet and clean, with the scent of Fake Outside on the air alongside paper and Pinesol.

The woman behind the front counter is someone he recognizes, which is a relief. Dealing with new people is always exhausting, and on his one weekly reprieve from routine, he tries to avoid inconveniences. She greets him with a smile that he sheepishly returns, shrugging his well-loved backpack from his shoulder.

"Have a good week?" she asks, ever chipper.

He nods, eyes jumping around her station. There's a lit candle on the counter, with a label that says 'Meadow Wind.' A small vase of cut Peonies sits near her computer.

"Making some returns?"

He nods again, though he thinks that this is evident by the small stack of books he's pulling from his bag and placing on the counter. She takes them, setting them aside to be logged into her system. As he pulls the last book from his bag, he spies his binder, loose pages sticking from it awkwardly.

"Anything else I can help you out with, darlin'? Or are you just gonna raid my ghost story section again?"

He swallows. Rubs at the pads of his thumbs as he thinks. After a moment he grabs a pen and one of the free bookmarks from the counter, flipping it over to quickly write on the back.

'Do you know anything about poetry?'

She frowns. "I can't say that I do, no. Unless you like Robert Frost," she adds with a chuckle.

His disappointment must be clear on his face because she quickly follows up. "I think one of our part-timers knows a bit. She's in here on weekday afternoons, if you wanted to come in and talk to her about some recommendations?"

Will chews the inside of his cheek. There's no way he could get away with coming here after school. He'd be late to work, and his dad would want to know why, and then he'd get pissed at him for slacking off. It's probably nothing, anyway. Still-

'Do you think you could pass a message to her for me? Then maybe next Sunday you could tell me what she said?'

"I guess I could do that, sure. What's the message?"

Will takes a breath, reaches down and pulls a page from the pocket of his binder. He sets it down on the counter, now familiar words staring back at him.

'My nerves are turned on. I hear them like musical instruments. Where there was once silence-
the drums, the strings are incurably playing.'

He's been looking at them more than he'd care to admit. More than the drawing on the other side. Much more. He knows his own appearance, and while he's found that seeing himself reflected through Hannibal's eyes is not exactly unpleasant, the lines on the back feel far more telling. So much of Hannibal Lecter seems performative, like he's very careful to only show the parts of himself that he wants to be seen. This fragment, though- it's incidental. An oversight. And Will can't explain why, but those lines have been echoing in his head lately. He needs to know more about them.

The librarian tilts her head, looking over the lines. "What's this from?" She asks, and picks up the paper.

Before he can stop himself, Will makes a small sound of protest, reaching up to take it back. She sets it back down quickly, an alarmed look on her face. Will can feel himself blushing now, the hot embarrassment crawling up the nape of his neck. He holds up his pen and mimes writing on the air. She hands him a sheet of blank paper, and he copies down the lines. After a moment of deliberation, he follows it with a footnote.

'Not sure if this is from a poem or something original- if you can't find a source, maybe something similar?'

He gingerly places the drawing back into his binder, fidgeting as the librarian reads the note before setting it aside.

"Alright. I'll pass that along for you and see what she turns up, okay?"

He nods, smiling in gratitude.

"Anything else?"

Will glances around. The library is practically empty. In the corner, two kids are sitting with a woman- their mother, he assumes. Softly, so softly that he can't make out the exact words, she reads aloud from a small book with a brightly colored cover.

-

It varies from place to place, but the average school cafeteria charges about a dollar fifty for a lunch. Will's old man may be a son of a bitch, but he doesn't want his son to starve- at least not in public. Which means every two weeks Will's dad sends him to school with fifteen dollars in cash, to be given to the lunch ladies and put into his meal account.

The school never sees a cent, so Will has a healthy stash of money to his name. He's strategic about it, keeps it in different places in case his dad ever finds out. The only money it ever looks like he has is change but he always has a fiver stashed in his wallet behind his driver's license. About twenty or thirty rolled up in a pair of socks that he never wears. Usually ten pressed between the pages of one of his books. He mainly spends money on his days off- Sunday lunch and maybe a soda, movie tickets when something worth seeing is playing, arcade tokens. Today he was planning on splurging and buying a pizza, but he ended up making an impulse purchase instead.

The headphones were the cheapest in the store, and the handheld cassette player was on sale, but it still wiped out all the cash Will had on him. At least the library is always free.

He sits in the grass near the edge of the river, lips pressed together in concentration as he baits his hook. The cast could be better- the first few of the day are never quite as smooth- but no one is there to see it. He reels it in nice and slow, taking a moment to savor the inhabited sort of quiet that only nature can provide. A silence that lives and moves, that loves and cares. The drums, the strings, incurably-

playing.

He shakes his head, reaching beside him for his new treasures. He'll have to stash them in his backpack, for now. Pray his dad doesn't see fit to rifle through his stuff anytime soon. Still, he couldn't stop himself.

The headphones are snug over his ears, comforting. He pops the tape from the library into place, hits play, and casts again.

'I am by birth a Genevese,' a rich timbered voice recites through the tape. 'My family, among the most distinguished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics, and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation...'

Will sighs, the tension leaving his shoulders as he listens. He's read this book before. More than once, even. Still, it seemed like a safe bet for testing Hannibal's 'books on tape' suggestion.

There's much to be said for Frankenstein's Creation. Patron Saint of the freakish, Martyr for the unheard and misunderstood. Will casts again. Frankenstein's monster- never directly called a 'monster' in the text- is described as a massive, hulking thing, nearly ten feet tall and more than capable of destroying anything it pleases. He doesn't find pleasure in the violence, though. Vows to kill himself, even, preferring suicide over isolation. Better to die than be on the outside looking in, with nothing.

Will often wished that he was ten feet tall. Fantasized about being grotesque. Not just othered for being 'different,' but for being monstrous. Something worth cruelty, if cruelty was coming either way. Maybe it would be easier to stomach, that way.

He swallows around his thoughts, takes a breath, and casts again. This time, the line glides through the air and lands in the middle of the stream.

-

'I know this girl.'

Hannibal cranes his neck to look over Will's shoulder at the sketchbook. They're sitting a bit closer together than usual for convenience, Will thumbing through the other boy's drawings. Will holds the book at a better angle, the image of Beverly Katz looking back at them.

'She's pretty cool. Do you know her or did she just catch your eye?'

Hannibal sets down his fork to speak. *'I sat across from her in our Biology class last Fall. I had ample time to study her face.'*

Will hums, flipping past drawing after drawing. Sketches of poses from old paintings, flowers, a portrait of a girl with long curly hair and sharp features.

'I took your advice, you know,' he signs after a while.

Hannibal tilts his head in interest.

'I checked out some of the books on tape at the library. It isn't the same as someone actually reading it to me, but it's nice.'

'Did you try any Poetry?'

Will shakes his head, hoping that the heat on his face is just in his head. *'Not yet.'*

'Well, I've held up my end of the bargain.'

Will frowns, and by way of response Hannibal turns in his chair and pulls a book from his bag. *'At the Mountains of Madness.'* Lovecraft.

'Trying my hand with horror,' Hannibal elaborates once the book is safely tucked away again.

'That wasn't on my list,' he replies, though he doesn't quite know why. It doesn't matter. No one has ever read a book for Will. No one has ever *tried* to understand him like this.

He resents himself for rejecting the kindness. He resents himself for caring about the kindness. For the way he's holding his hands together to keep from stimming.

'May I ask you something?'

Will nods.

'What is it about horror specifically that interests you?'

He chews his lip, thinking it over. Eventually, he looks up at the other boy.

'It's never polite.'

Hannibal smiles at that, another wide, pointy grin. *'No, I don't suppose it is.'*

Will smiles back. It's rare that he feels comfortable enough to make eye contact with another person, but he catches Hannibal's gaze for a moment. There's a warmth in those brown eyes, one that Will is not accustomed to seeing aimed at him.

He coughs, looking back down to the sketchbook. More insects. Fireflies, butterflies, moths. A lot of snails. He reaches out, absent-mindedly traces the spiral of a snail's shell. He can feel Hannibal, watching him.

Whatever the other boy is eating smells amazing. Acidic, vibrant. It's distracting. He looks at the plastic container, Hannibal gathering another mouthful.

'What is that?'

Hannibal straightens his shoulders, his pride evident in his body language. *'A kale and chicken salad with apples, walnuts, and a simple vinaigrette.'*

Will swallows. Licks his lips. Skipping his Sunday lunch has left him wanting, having settled for cereal as his dinner the night before.

'Would you like to try it?'

Will blinks, and before he's able to awkwardly decline, Hannibal is fishing a spare fork from his lunchbox and holding it out to him. He can't stop himself from signing *'Are you sure?'* even though the boy certainly seems sure. When Hannibal not only nods, but pushes the container a bit closer to Will, he takes the fork and samples the meal.

He hums around the mouthful. It could be in part because he hasn't eaten yet today, but damn it tastes great.

'It's good,' he admits. *'Thanks.'*

When he braves another glance up at Hannibal, his expression gives Will pause. His eyes are a little wide, his face blank. For a moment, Will worries he's upset the other boy, somehow.

Then Hannibal is pushing the bowl further across the table, until it's nearly nudging the sketchbook in front of Will.

'You can have more, if you'd like,' Hannibal signs, his face returning mostly to its usual disposition.

Will hesitates for a moment, but the food was freely offered, and he's hungry, and it tastes good, so he'd be a fool to say no. He takes another large bite, closing the sketchbook so that the pages can't accidentally get anything spilled on them.

'What sorts of foods do you like, Will?'

Will shrugs. *'I'm not picky.'*

'I didn't ask what foods you were willing to eat, I asked what you like.'

Will considers his answer. *'Honestly I'm just sick of microwaves,'* he quips, and Hannibal smiles. *'Anything fresh and real. Vegetables. Meat. I like spicy food.'*

Hannibal gives him that warm look again, and Will has trouble swallowing.

'So what did you think of the book? Have you finished it yet?' he asks, suddenly eager to let Hannibal do the talking.

Hannibal lets him off the hook, starts sharing his thoughts. Will listens and tries not to think about how oddly convenient it was that Hannibal happened to have a second fork in his lunchbox for him.

Hannibal the Cannibal

Chapter Notes

this chapter came out way different from what I initially imagined, but I think I like it????

It's easier than people make it look, sneaking away at school. Will's only skipped class a few times in his life but he never once got caught. It helped that he was usually just hiding in the bathrooms the whole time, waiting for the noise in his head to subside or avoiding conflict or coughing up a lung on one of the cigarettes he'd stolen from another kid's backpack. Today it should be even easier than usual, since class is not technically in session.

You aren't supposed to leave the gym during a pep rally. Too much can happen when all of the students and most of the faculty are in one place, leaving the rest of the school vacant. Will assumes that the usual temptation would be to ask to go to the restroom, and then slip away. It's easier, though, to simply fall behind the cresting wave of excited teens and just never *enter* the gym in the first place.

It isn't that he holds a grudge against pep rallies, per se, more that he's never been compatible with the concept. Loud, crowded gymnasium full of screaming, jumping kids and music and far too much energy for Will to handle. He's never made it through one without getting overstimulated, and he's decided that it really isn't worth the effort.

So he's ready to spend the last hour of school hidden in the bathroom, listening to his book on tape.

"Will! Hey, come sit with us!"

Will grimaces at being caught, then turns to see Beverly beckoning him over. He sighs, running an exasperated hand through his hair. He could just tell her to fuck off, but Bev is one of the only people in this godforsaken town who actually gives him the time of day. He wouldn't necessarily call them *friends,* but he still isn't keen on making her hate him.

He salutes to her as he crosses the hall, and she salutes back with a smirk.

"The pep rallies here probably don't hold a candle to all the other ones you've seen," she says, "but some of our cheers are sort of catchy, and our band is really-"

"They're okay," a boy standing beside Bev finishes, and Bev rolls her eyes. "They were better before I quit, but hey- Freddie Lounds knows what a clarinet *is,* and apparently that's good enough for my replacement."

Another boy with short dark hair snorts. "It's a fifty-fifty chance if she blows into the right end, though."

The first boy laughs. "They're lucky she can tell a Tone Hole from her Asshole."

"Jimmy, if you're so committed to the art, then stage a coup and steal the spot back," Beverly says, and the boy bears a set of metal-laced teeth.

"Over my orthodontist's dead body. Plus my mom would have a heart attack. Every time I *look* at a pack of gum, it's all 'don't you know how much those things are costing us?' "

"At least by the time you graduate your teeth will be straighter than you are."

"I'm not fucking gay, Brian."

"You'll be a solid five out of ten, by then."

"If only there was hope for you-"

Beverly clears her throat, then, nodding to Will. "Knock it off for five seconds, yeah? This is the guy I was telling you about."

The boys stop in their tracks, as if they've only just realized Will is there.

"Will- these, unfortunately, are my friends. Brian Zeller and Jimmy Price. Boys, this is Will."

Will gives a sharp, polite nod.

Brian tilts his head. "What, the deaf kid?"

Bev punches him in the shoulder before Will can so much as flip the boy off.

"I told you, he's not deaf!"

"Heard you're a pretty big film buff, Will," Jimmy says.

Will just shrugs, a bit sheepish.

"Well, aren't you a sparkling conversationalist."

Beverly groans, taking Will by the arm and half-dragging him to the gym. "Come on, fuck those guys," she mutters, but she still shouts "and I'm not saving seats for you losers either, so keep up!" over her shoulder.

"They grow on you, I promise," she adds as she fights her way up the rapidly filling bleachers. "Like mold, but they grow on you."

Will sits beside her, watching as Jimmy and Brian follow up the bleachers and sit together on the other side of Beverly. He pulls his notebook out of his bag, resigning himself to endure the quiet torture of meeting new people.

"Why can't he talk if he's not deaf?" Brian asks, directing the question to Beverly rather than Will.

Will quirks a brow at her. **'Like mold, you said?'**

She chuckles.

"What did he say? Let me see."

Will jots down a message and passes it to Bev so the other boys can read it.

'I never learned. Raised in the woods. Fluent in wolf, though.'

That one gets a laugh from both Bev and Jimmy, which brings a satisfied smirk to Will's face. It's a shame so much of comedy relies on timing.

Brian looks a bit embarrassed. "Sorry," he mumbles. "Um, where did you move from?"

Good, a short answer. **'Iowa.'**

He does a terrible job at feigning interest in that, but he does try. "Oh, what was that like?"

'Boring.'

The river of students flowing into the gym is thinning out, most of the students already finding seats. The gym is deafening, hundreds of concurrent conversations almost making him feel physically ill. He scans the crowd. Not looking for anything in particular, just looking.

"Bet that gets annoying, huh?"

He furrows his brows, turning back to look at Jimmy. The other boy gestures at the notebook. "Writing everything down."

Will just nods, once again looking around the gym. Groups of kids he doesn't know and doesn't care to know, spread out across the bleachers, all talking. He thinks of a painting Hannibal showed him once. *School of Athens.* The comparison makes him smile.

Margot Verger is down on the gym floor, decked out in the school's trademark red and white, saxophone in hand. She's talking with a cheerleader, a petite girl with her long dark hair tied in a high ponytail. The cheerleader looks around the room, and her eyes land on Will. She smiles.

"You looking for somebody, Will?" Bev prods.

Will shakes his head.

"Liar," she teases. Then after a moment, she speaks again, softer. "You're not looking for Lecter, are you?"

He tenses, straightening his shoulders. He had been, hadn't he? Searching for pointed teeth and big brown eyes. Without really thinking about it, he'd been trying to locate Hannibal in the crowd.

Bev sighs. "I told you not to get involved with that guy. You're not still friends with Hannibal, are you?"

Will is about to respond, to deny, but Brian speaks before Will can even reach for the book.

"Hannibal Lecter? You're friends with Hannibal the Cannibal?"

Hannibal the *what?* His frown deepens, and he casts a confused look at the other three kids.

"It's just a shitty nickname. You know how people talk," Bev says.

"Oh yeah? Then ask if you can come to his house for dinner on Saturday."

"Shut up!"

Jimmy looks to Will, taking it upon himself to explain. "Hannibal Lecter moved here right before Freshman year," he says, and the other two fall quiet. "He lives with his uncle, on the North side of town. Know why he lives with his uncle?"

Will shakes his head. He'd never asked Hannibal about his home life, and Hannibal returned the favor regarding Will's. It feels wrong, hearing about it secondhand, but he's too curious to stop listening.

Jimmy opens his mouth to speak, but Brian interrupts him. "It's because his family was *murdered.* The story goes that the guy broke into their house, killed both of Hannibal's parents and his sister, and Hannibal got away."

He feels his heart plummet into his stomach. Hannibal has always been kind to him, even if he is a little...odd. **'Is that true?'** he writes, caught somewhere between sympathy and horror.

"That's the official story, anyway," Bev says. "His Uncle told the Principal that Hannibal hasn't spoken since."

Will feels his eyes go wide. *That's* why he doesn't speak?

'That's terrible.'

Brian scoffs. "If it's true, yeah. But that's just the story they *want* you to believe."

In response to Will's silent urging for them to elaborate, Jimmy arches a brow at him. "A lot of people say that he didn't just *run away.* That he got his revenge. Killed the guy for taking his family from him. They say that when they found him, he was elbows-deep in the killer's guts. But he was just a kid, and it was self-defense, so they let him go."

Will shifts uncomfortably, a chill running down his spine.

"And some people say-"

"Some people say that he killed his family himself, because he wanted to eat their bodies," Beverly says, her eyes fixed on the door. Will follows her gaze and sees Hannibal, sketchbook under his arm as he searches the gym for an empty seat.

"I don't believe it," she says, watching Hannibal sink into a corner seat, ignored. "But there's definitely something...off about him. Something I can't really put my finger on. I don't know, maybe everything that happened just fucked him up inside. Either way, everybody keeps their distance from him."

Her eyes flick sidelong to look at Will. "Except for you."

Will huffs, shaking the unease from his shoulders and taking the notebook.

'There's no way any of that shit is true,' he writes, and he's surprised by how angry he feels. He chalks it up to knowing firsthand how cruel kids can be to people who are different from them. **'A Cannibal, Bev? Really? Some asshole probably started that rumor because it rhymes and then everyone just believed it because he's weird.'**

"I said I didn't believe that part-" Bev tries, but Will doesn't stop writing for a moment.

'You know what? Fuck you guys.'

And with that, Will is striding for the door of the gym. A coach tries to stop him, to say that the rally is about to start and he needs to be back quickly, but Will just brushes past.

"Will!"

Beverly chases him out into the hall, and Will has to swallow a wave of frustrated tears.

'Leave me alone,' he signs, though he knows she won't understand. No one ever understands.

"Will, please, can we just talk for a minute?"

'I can't believe I actually thought that you were cool. I thought you weren't like everybody else, but you are.'

She huffs in annoyance. "You know I can't understand what you're saying."

'What do you say about me when I'm not around? Do you think there's something Off about me, too?'

"Are you finished yet?" Bev asks, arms crossed in annoyance.

Will turns on her, points two fingers at himself, the index touching his nose. Then he makes a circle with his index finger and thumb. He scrawls the translation on the open page of his notebook in large letters.

'Fuck. Off.'

She stares at the page for a moment, then at him. "Fuck off," she says, and as she does she mimics the gesture.

Will does it back, reconfirming.

Bev gives him a look of challenge. "Alright. What else? Let me have it."

'Fine! You were acting like a real bitch back there- is that what you want me to say?' he signs, and when he's finished he brings his hand to his mouth, fingers together with this index against his lip, his thumb to the side. **'A bitch,'** he writes.

"Fuck off, bitch," Bev repeats, signing along.

Will runs a hand through his hair, blowing out a long breath.

"Look, I'm sorry, alright?" she says, and as she does, she signs the same sentiment. It's the same sign Hannibal used, the first time they talked. Will frowns in confusion.

"I know you're upset because he's your friend, but I didn't make up the fucking rumor. I've never picked on him, I've never done anything other than leave him alone."

'He's not my friend,' Will corrects reflexively.

"Then what's your damage?"

He hesitates before answering.

'I've had rumors like that spread about me before. It really, really sucks.'

Will sits on a bench against the wall, suddenly exhausted from the barrage of emotions he's endured today. Beverly sits beside him.

"Are you mad at me?"

He looks at her from the corner of his eye. She does look genuinely sorry. He shrugs.

'I'm mad at your friends, I guess. And the people who spread that kind of shit.'

"I told you, this school is full of bitches," she says, and when she swears she performs the accompanying sign. Will snorts despite himself. "You're a really nice person, Will. I like you. I don't want to see you get the shit beat out of you just because you're hanging around Hannibal the Cannibal all the time."

'I'm used to bullies, Bev. I've never tried to fit in, I'm not starting now.'

"Okay, fine," she says. "I already told you I'm not gonna boss you around, but it'll be your funeral."

Will gives her a serious look before writing another message.

'So you like me?'

His face breaks into a grin when she rolls her eyes. "Yes, I like you, asshole. Why do you think I sit with you and walk with you to Trig and chase after you when I fuck up? You and me, we're- um..."

She moves her hands, slowly. Spelling, one letter at a time.

'F-R-I-E-N-D-S'

When she finishes, she glances up at him, a shadow of nervousness in her eyes.

"We're friends...right?"

Will swallows. His hands go clammy.

'How did you learn that?'

She breathes out a laugh. "You think you're the only one with a library card? I only really know the alphabet right now. 'Please' and 'Thank you' and stuff. But I'm working on it. Saves on paper, right?"

He hesitates before writing again.

'I haven't had a friend in a long time. I don't know how good at it I am.'

"That's okay. I mean, you've seen Jimmy and Brian. My standards are like, so low it's sad."

Will laughs. Looks over to her. Hooks his index fingers together- right over left, then left over right.

'Friends,' he explains.

She smiles. Repeats the sign.

'Friends.'

Raindrops

Chapter Notes

> sorry for the late update! I think I'll be shifting to a more loose schedule on this fic- still weekly but not strictly on Fridays. Anyway I hope you love this chapter as much as I do!!!!

It's overcast today. It's been overcast all week, in fact. Will's been stubbornly praying that it will rain someday. Not just the five minutes here and there that are so characteristic of the south- impossible to plan for and impossible to acclimate to- but a proper storm that washes all the dead leaves from the gutters and makes you dread walking from the front door to your car. Will's always had an affinity for a good rainstorm. His father doesn't work when it rains- bad for his tools and bad for morale. So Will sits near a window, when windows are available, and watches the droplets ricochet off the pavement and weigh down delicate camellia blossoms. Curls up with a book and imagines himself having a reading nook of his own someday- one with shelves of books that are well-worn by his own hands and a place on the windowsill to set a cup of hot tea.

The clouds overhead still haven't shown any signs of finally bursting, though. Maybe tomorrow.

"Hey Will!"

He freezes. Usually those words are being said by Beverly Katz, but this time they're called by a voice that he can't quite recognize.

"Hang on for sec, I wanna talk to you."

Will turns, and immediately wishes he'd just kept walking. He does know this voice, but he's only heard it insult him in passing.

Mason Verger approaches, two other boys from their grade in tow. Will tries to subtly glance around the parking lot, scanning the sea of students going home for the day in search of a familiar face. Faculty, even. He doesn't see anyone.

The other boy gestures to the backpack hanging from Will's shoulder.

"Whatcha got in there, Will?"

Will grips the bag more tightly and takes a step backwards. He narrows his eyes, sizing the trio up. Mason isn't particularly threatening- Will is definitely a faster runner, and he could likely take Mason in fight, if it came to that. His friends, however,

He swallows.

Mason reaches out. "Come on, I just wanna take a look. That's okay, right? Say 'no' if it's not okay."

Will bites his tongue. Mason smirks.

"Not hearing anything, guess that means it's alright." he looks up to one of his friends, Will recognizes him from the pep rally as a member of the basketball team. "Go on, take it, he didn't say you couldn't."

Will glares up at the boy when he makes a grab for the backpack. He catches the hanging strap, and Will tries to wrestle it back for a few moments but he's acutely aware that this bag has seen better days. It's been with him through three different schools now. He feels the seam start to pop, grits his teeth, lets it go.

The boy hands the bag to Mason, who smiles with a sickening level of faux-politeness.

"Let's see what we have here." He unzips the backpack, making a show out of rifling through his notebooks and folders. "Pens, textbooks- oh, is this your diary, Will?"

Will tries to snatch the bag back, and Mason pulls away with a look of offense.

"Easy, easy! No need to be so aggressive." He casts the other boys a knowing look. "Maybe it's true, what they say about him, hm? If you want your stuff back, just ask for it."

Hot anger rises along the back of his neck. His fists ball at his sides.

"Go ahead and say it, Will. Say you want it back."

'You're such a dick.'

Mason smiles. "Guess you don't want it back, then." He shrugs. "Doesn't look like there's anything good in here, anyway."

Will tries not to let his relief show. His headphones and tape player are tucked into a small side pocket, and it seems that Mason is ignoring it.

He cringes when Mason pulls one of his library books from the bag. He inspects the cover.

" 'The Reality of Terror: The Val Lewton Story.' Right, you're into all that monster movie stuff, aren't you?" He furrows his brows. "You know this just makes people think you're even more of a freak than you already are, don't you? Why don't you let me do you a favor and take this off your hands?"

Will sets his jaw, outright refusing to let any tears of frustration rise. He can't let Mason know he's getting under his skin, it'll just make it worse. That always makes it worse.

If he doesn't return that book, though, he'll get in trouble with the library. What if he can't check out books anymore?

"Mason!"

All four boys look in the direction of the voice. It's Margot Verger, standing near the driver's door of her car.

"Come on, you're gonna make me late for practice if you don't get your ass in the car."

Mason huffs, brandishing the book in Will's direction. "You'll thank me for this," he says, and drops the backpack onto the ground as he passes.

Margot waits for Mason get into the passenger seat, and pulls a pair of sunglasses from her purse. As she retrieves them, she looks up and makes eye contact with Will. For just a moment, she smiles.

-

"What do you mean, you lost it?"

Will shrugs, unable to look the librarian in the eye. **'I must've left it somewhere. I'm sorry.'**

"Well, maybe you could retrace your steps? I'll still have to issue a late fee, but if you can't find it we'll need to fine you for a replacement."

He chews on his lower lip, writing with shaking hands.

'I don't know if I'll be able to get it back.'

She sighs. When he glances up, she's looking at him with a concerned expression.

"...Did something happen to the book, Will? Someone didn't steal it from you, did they?"

'How much is the fine?'

The librarian winces. "Twenty."

Will looks up, eyes fixed on the ceiling. His eyes sting.

"You don't have to pay it right now, but I can't let you check out any more books until you do."

He nods. Sniffs. Starts rummaging through his bag for the other books he has to return. It's fine. He tells himself that it's fine. He has the money, stashed away. He'll just have to come back next Sunday with the money, pay for the replacement, and everything will be fine.

"...Do you have ten?"

He frowns at her.

"I have ten in my purse," she says. "You can pay half and I'll pay the other half."

Will is stunned for a handful of moments. Once he's able to process the offer, his face breaks into a grin. He reaches into his wallet.

'Thank you,' he signs, and when he realizes his mistake he grabs the pen.

'Thank you so much, that's really nice of you.'

She smiles. "You seem like a good kid. And accidents happen, you know? But if any of your books get...lost, again- you should talk to someone. Maybe your parents can help you get it back?"

He nods, though he knows beyond a doubt that his father would *never* hear about any of this.

"Oh! I meant to tell you!"

The librarian grabs a small stack of photocopied pages from behind the counter, holding them up triumphantly.

"Molly found your poem for you!"

Will's mood spins on a dime, and he eyes the pages with awe. His stomach flutters. He takes them, and scans the top page as she speaks.

"Those lines you showed me are from the poem 'The Kiss' by Anne Sexton- we don't have any of her work available here but Molly tracked down some of it at the library over in Shreveport! They were nice enough to copy some poems and fax 'em over. That's 'The Kiss', and a couple others she wrote."

He flips through the pages, the black lines of text a little fuzzy at the edges from the poor resolution of the photocopier. **'Just Once,'** the poet proclaims, **'I knew what life was for.'**

-

Will doesn't read 'The Kiss' until he's outside. He leans against the side wall of the library, the red bricks rough on his back but slightly warmed by the brief cameos the sun has been making through the clouds. His heart is in his throat, hammering away like he's eaten a hummingbird, and he can't even seem to pinpoint *why.* It's something about those lines, he reckons. Poetry is supposed to have this sort of effect, it's meant to leave you feeling different.

It must be a damn good poem.

He skims it, searching impatiently at first. And there it is, at the start of the final stanza. Those words that may as well be tattooed on the insides of his eyelids for all the times he's read them. My nerves, turned on, musical instruments. Seeing them within their intended context feels incredibly satisfying, after seeing them as an isolated fragment for so long. Although it also leaves him feeling a bit confused. Hannibal must've scrawled these lines down on the other side of his drawing by mistake because there doesn't seem to be any connection. He'd assumed that they weren't meant to be seen- based on the quick, sloppy way

Hannibal had written them- but a part of him had thought there may be some line to be drawn between himself and the poem. Unfortunately, it seems to just be a coincidence.

The second time, he reads it slowly. Takes in every single word because each one is important. It's a love poem, naturally. Through one kiss, in one singular moment, the poet feels singularly *alive.* **'Zing! A resurrection!'** the poem says, and Will finds himself thinking of Frankenstein's creature once again.

Will's never been kissed, but if it feels like the poem suggests, he understands why love seems to drive people mad. What he'd give to feel this invigorated. He sees why Hannibal felt compelled to write down a few lines from this piece.

When he reads it again, he tries to imagine it being spoken. Chooses a voice he knows well enough to mentally replicate. His father doesn't have the right voice for poetry. It doesn't sit properly in his head. Still, he doesn't have many options, so he tries to make it fit. Poetry is best enjoyed when read aloud, Hannibal had insisted, and it made Will curious.

Suddenly, a drop of water falls onto the page. The paper turns transparent around it, and it distorts the word printed there. **'salt'.**

The single drop is his only warning, and in a flash he's shoving the poems into his backpack as rain begins to crash all around him.

-

They're rare, nights like tonight. Nights where Will's dad is too drunk to drive but not too drunk to care, and sends his son out with the keys to the pickup. The windshield wipers are nearly useless as they sweep the rain aside, bravely exhausting the last of their strength to guide Will's way through the still heavy downpour. He prays that no one will notice the long-broken brake light, but aside from that he revels in the small offering of freedom. Maybe she's a piece of shit, but on these precious occasions she's *Will's* piece of shit. The truck is almost as old as he is, it's practically a sister to him. He'd at one time been naive enough to think he may get to drive to school and back once he turned sixteen, or at the very least would get to use it on the weekends. It feels like a silly dream, now, but when he was a kid he imagined his dad getting a new truck, and passing this one onto Will. Seems more likely that his old man will keep using it, keep stubbornly fixing the gear shift when it starts drifting to neutral on its own every few months. Eventually it'll give up on them, and they'll sell it for scrap.

Will sits in the driver's seat, the truck lying dormant in an empty corner of the parking lot. He reaches into one of the bags in the passenger's seat and grabs a handful of french fries, his cargo for this particular mission. He'd been tempted to pocket part of the change, when his dad had handed him a few more dollars than he needed for dinner. Years of experience have taught him that the risks of such a maneuver outweigh the rewards. He'll bring his dad's burger back to the hotel soon, but for now he sits in the dark silence of the truck, and watches the rain hit the windshield.

The streetlamps are blurry, pretty shapes through the glass. Off in the distance, past the laundry mat and the gas station across the street, Will can just make out a small residential

area. A neighborhood, with small, near-identical houses. He sighs. Inside, he imagines families sitting around their televisions, and gas stoves, and children with bedrooms of their own - beds left thoughtlessly unmade due to typical weekend laziness. He finds himself imagining what sort of house Beverly Katz lives in. If it's big, if it's clean, if she's warm.

On the North side of town, past the nearly vacant shopping mall, Hannibal Lecter lives with his uncle. It's a fancier part of town, the Vergers probably live there, too. Maybe even in the same neighborhood. Right now, Hannibal is likely having dinner. Probably something homemade and flavorful. Maybe after that he helps his uncle do the dishes. Maybe his uncle washes and Hannibal dries. What does he do in the evenings, before bed? When Will gets home and hands a burger and fries to his father, will Hannibal be studying? Drawing, perhaps?

The rain picks up a little, and the wind sends a rogue tree branch falling nearby. No. Hannibal is sitting at a desk, the curtains drawn on his bedroom window so he can watch the rain outside as he reads. Poetry. He's reading poetry. Is it Anne Sexton? Is it 'The Kiss'? Is he thinking of Will?

Will sits up straight, shocking himself immediately from his thoughts. He turns the key, the old Chevy sputtering to life, and peels out of the parking lot.

Luckily, his face has stopped burning by the time he returns to their room. His dad is passed out in bed, so Will shoves his father's dinner into the mini-fridge. He's confident that he won't be waking up anytime soon, so Will turns on a small lamp near the window. By the warm glow, where no one will see him, he reads 'The Kiss'. He traces the lines, and the rain becomes a voice, reading the words to him again and again until he can hardly keep his eyes open.

Lottie

Chapter Notes

> this chapter is a little emotionally intense, just as a warning! make sure you're ready for some angst before reading!

"Your hair's getting real long."

Will shrugs, flicking the locks hanging in his face away.

"You need to cut it soon."

He frowns, looking up from his book. His dad is regarding him from the kitchen, a half-eaten bologna sandwich in his hand.

'So take me to a barbershop.'

"I'll cut it for you."

'I'm not letting you near my hair again.'

"What are you talking about? I always cut your hair."

'And the last time you did it I got bullied for weeks. You cut it way too short, it looks weird.'

His dad just shakes his head, taking a long drink of his beer. "It's practical, Willy. Keeps hair from getting in your eyes while you're working."

'I could tie it back.'

"Sure, let's braid it while we're at it. Buy you some lip gloss."

Will bites his tongue. *'Lots of boys wear their hair long, dad. I like it like this.'*

He glances back down at the pages of his book. Thinks of that painting of Cephalus in Hannibal's Artbook. Of the drawing still faithfully tucked in his binder. The graphite is getting smudged, but Will doesn't know where else to put it. 'You have appealing features', he'd said, and Will had never really considered himself to be particularly attractive but Hannibal had no reason to lie about it. It made him feel good about himself.

'Other people like it like this.'

His dad lifts a brow. "Yeah? That-uh," he snaps his fingers, the name failing him. "That girl in your class, what's her name again?"

'Bev.'

He smirks. "She still talking to you?"

Will nods. *'I've been teaching her some ASL. Not much, but she's an expert at cussing now.'*

His dad chuckles, tipping back his beer. "See, Willy? All those shrinks your mom took you to, they tried to say you'd never learn to get along with other kids. I knew that was bullshit. Just needed to get past your awkward phase- girls are gonna be all over you before you know it."

He forces a smile. He knows by now that it's easier to just play along. Nothing to be gained by trying to explain that he didn't *want* to fit in or get attention from girls.

Still, this is as good of an opening as any.

'About Bev,' he signs, trying to hide how nervous he is. *'She actually asked me to hang out after school.'*

"She asked you out?"

'I don't think it's like that,' he replies, perhaps a bit too quickly. He feels anxious even considering it. *'Her friends would be with us. She wanted to go to Frank's Diner.'*

"It's still a step in the right direction," he says. Will watches as he falls onto the couch beside him. He turns on the TV, flips through the channels for a bit before landing on a rerun of *Cheers.*

Will waits. Fidgets. Chews the inside of his cheek.

'...So?'

His father glances at him from the corner of his eye. "So what?"

'So can I go?'

He sighs heavily, and Will already knows he's sunk. "I need you at the docks, you know that."

His mouth twists. *'It would only be for a little while after school,'* he bargains, *'I could have her drop me off near the dock right after.'*

"I said no, son."

Will tries to contain his annoyance. His old man can be so strict, it drives him insane. He's gotten good at holding his tongue, though.

Usually.

'You can't give me one afternoon off?'

"You've got Sundays off," the older man says, and there's an edge of anger in his tone. "You can go out with Bev then."

He blows out sharply through his nose. *'That's so unfair-'*

The sound of the slap against his hands comes before the sting. The slap stops him in his tracks, as it's conditioned to.

"You'd better get used to shit being unfair, Willy. That's life." He settles back against the couch. "I don't wanna hear any more of this, is that clear?"

Will grits his teeth. He's sick of this. Sick of no one listening to him, sick of being restricted. He knows it's not smart- the stupidest thing he can do, really- but before he can think it through he's on his feet. He grabs the remote and switches off the TV, staring him down.

"The hell's gotten into you?"

*'What do you **want** from me?'*

"Excuse me?"

'You want me to fit in, right? Make friends? That's what you've been saying since I was five fucking years old, isn't it?'

"Hey, don't you use that language with me!"

*'I'm making friends, Dad! I'm doing what you wanted! You want me to be **normal?** Normal kids hang out with their friends. Normal kids have car keys, and allowances, and **privacy!** What do I have? You say you want me to be like everyone else and then you treat me like shit-'*

When his father slaps his hands down again, harder this time, Will barely falters. He steps back, retreating out of his range.

"You keep that shit up, I'll give you something to complain about."

'What are you gonna do?' he challenges, refusing to allow the frustrated tears that are building to fall. *'Ground me? Take all my stuff away?'* His expression goes cold as stone, defiance in his eyes. *'Send me to my room?'*

Will chokes when his father grabs him by the arm, his grip tight enough to threaten a bruise. All the rebellious fury drains from him. He swallows, hard.

"You are not in charge here, Willy," the older man says, his voice rough with anger. "If I say something, that's law- you got it? I don't want you catching a fucking attitude with me again unless you're paying rent."

And oh, Will wants *so badly* to mention that he probably *could* pay rent, and buy more for himself besides, if he had a job that actually fucking paid him. But instead he just nods.

"Tell me you understand."

Will sets his jaw. *'I understand.'*

He scowls at Will's hands, like they've offended him, and then lets go of Will's arm and makes for the door.

"I'm goin' out for a bit," he mutters. "Do your homework, be in bed before midnight."

Will glares at the door for a long while after it shuts, his blood burning white-hot with rage and shame. He's filled with an uncomfortable amount of energy, now, and it makes him feel shaky. He wishes he could vent to someone. Hannibal. Hannibal would understand. He'd listen, and tell Will that he deserved better, and that his father was wrong about him- that he's good enough the way he is. He would.

Wouldn't he?

He runs an exhausted hand through his hair. Maybe not. Maybe he'd just tell Will that he was being sensitive. Over-dramatic. That Will should just be grateful he *has* a parent in the first place.

He wants to believe the first version, though.

Will falls into a chair at the small table near the kitchen. He grabs his notebook from his bag, flips to a page filled with half-written fragments, and writes.

'It isn't the meat they're after, when they hunt.
It isn't the odd pelt that covers it-
Crooked skin over a crooked skeleton, not quite man and not quite animal.

It isn't fame or glory. Not prestige. They won't put it in a zoo or on display in a museum.
It'd fetch a crowd at the circus, if it was about the money.

The beast lives. Oh, the Horror- the Beast lives.

Kill it, for all that is holy. Quickly, before it breeds.'

He rips the page out of the notebook, crumples it into a ball. Tries to toss it into the trashcan, and misses by a few inches.

The rest of his night is uneventful. When he finally cools off- and admittedly that takes longer than it should- he tries to salvage the evening. Takes a long, warm shower. Eats some microwaved mac 'n cheese. Half-watches three episodes of *Family Feud* just because it's TV and he's alone and there's nothing else on.

When it starts to get late he curls up on the pull-out couch under a blanket and puts on his headphones. Molly at the library must've been pretty excited that another teenager was interested in poetry- they still hadn't met in person but she set aside a bunch of

recommendations for him to look over on Sunday. She even found a few poems on tapes, which Will was very pleased about.

He stares at the ceiling and listens. It's a collection by Dorothy Parker, he's listened to some of it already and it suits his tastes pretty well. Direct, with no fluff and only the right amount of flowers. Funny, too, at times. It feels deeply honest in a way he enjoys. It's strange, he never thought he would grow to like poetry but there's something so intensely emotional about it. Like horror, the poetry he likes best is never polite.

'There's a place I know, where the birds swing low,' the woman on the tape recites, 'And wayward vines go roaming.'

He sighs, relaxing and stretching his legs. The woman they had record this has a southern accent- Georgia, maybe? Appalachian. She's older, maybe in her early forties. Her voice is warm despite the somewhat bitter subject matter, soft and kind. Nurturing.

'Where the lilacs nod, and a marble God is pale in scented gloaming.'

Hannibal was right about poetry being better spoken than read. Something about the intimacy of her delivery makes him feel like she's actually speaking to him.

'And at sunset there comes a lady fair, whose eyes are deep with yearning.'

His heart aches.

Will never really got to know his mother. She died when he was four. Nothing dramatic or traumatizing, though if Will focuses hard enough he can just graze his fingertips against a memory of sitting in a hospital waiting room. His dad doesn't like to talk about her much. Not when he's sober, anyway.

He likes to imagine her, though. Assemble her like Frankenstein's Monster, a homunculus built from fragments of the past. A blurry vision of her, singing to him. So distorted by time and repeated recall that it probably isn't close to accurate. The little things his dad has mentioned over the years. It's all held together with the glue of wishful thinking.

In his mind she has freckles. And dark hair. Long, raven curls that fall over her face when she's cooking or writing or reading. Blue eyes, like his own. He had to get them somewhere, and his father's hazel set seems to point to a blue-eyed mother. A big bright smile. She snorts when she laughs. She's a good cook, and she loves to read, and she tells Will that he's her pride and joy. Maybe they still argue sometimes- maybe she wants him to cut his hair, too- but at the end of the day she still fondly ruffles the locks and hugs him tight and tells him that everything will be okay.

'By an old, old gate does the lady wait, her own true love's returning.'

He's crying before he can stop it. It sends a stab of anxiety through him. He's trained himself to never, ever cry in front of people. To have tears in his eyes, maybe, but to never let them fall. He rarely cries when he's alone, either. It only ever makes him feel worse. He can't seem to stop once he starts, though.

A small sob forces its way up his throat, and it sounds so pathetic in this empty, dark room. He rolls onto his stomach, presses his face to the pillow to hide the rare, painful sound of his own voice.

The poem goes on. The fair lady's lover never comes home. His mother's name was Charlotte but his dad called her Lottie. She was born in August. She was only twenty-eight when she died. Will listens to the woman on the tape, and holds the pillow close, and eventually he's too exhausted to cry.

He doesn't know how many hours have passed when he wakes to the sound of the door opening. It's still dark out. It could have only been a few minutes. His headphones have ended up sprawled across the mattress. Luckily he's quick enough to cover the headphones and the tape player with his blanket before his dad comes near.

"Willy?" He's speaking lower than usual. "You awake?"

Will sighs, rolls over so that his back is to him.

His dad either isn't deterred or just doesn't care. He stumbles over, sits on the edge of the mattress.

"Hey, come on. I wanna talk to you."

Will glances at him over his shoulder. Flops onto his back. Waits.

"You're a good kid, Willy."

He nods. He knows this routine. He and his old man get into a fight, things get heated, then all of the sudden it's 'I'm only hard on you because I care, let's go get something to eat.' He hates it. Hates that it toys with his emotions. Hates that nothing ever changes. Most of all, he hates that it still works on him sometimes.

"And I'm glad things are going better for you, here. Really. I'm glad you're making friends. I know you're lonesome, even if you act like you aren't."

Will bites the inside of his lip to keep it from trembling.

"I'm hoping we can even stay in town longer than usual. Least until the end of the semester. No promises, though."

Another nod.

"Look at me."

He really doesn't want to. He peers up at him anyway, through the dark. He looks exhausted.

"Listen...maybe I could stand to lose you on Thursday afternoons. We're usually pretty slow in the middle of the week, anyway."

Will perks up at that. *'Really?'*

His dad smiles. "Yeah. Just have that girl of yours bring you down to the dock by five, so you can help me get things ready to close up shop. And don't get into any trouble."

'Okay,' he signs, still a little awestruck that his dad *actually* changed his mind about something. *'Thank you.'*

He pats the mattress. "Don't mention it. Now get some sleep, alright?"

'Good night.'

When the bedroom door clicks shut, Will curls back up, smiling to himself. He's excited to have a little more free time. More than that though, he's happy that they might be staying here until May. Happier than he expected to be. This is rare, and of all the places they've lived, this seems like a good one to stick around. He hadn't let himself think much about it- too obsessed with transience to get attached- but yes, Will wants to stay. He likes it here. He wants to spend time with Bev. He wants to make stilted small talk with the ladies at the public library. He wants to get to know Hannibal better, whether he'd ever admit that or not.

He tries to remind himself that it still isn't permanent, that they'll still be gone in a few months at best. He's still stimming under his blanket at the very idea of seeing the seasons change from winter to spring, and maybe even a glimpse of summer.

He falls asleep, picturing the blazing afternoon sun reflecting off his favorite stream, and more graphite drawings. Maybe one where Will is smiling, for a change.

Mouthful

Chapter Notes

> I've been excited to get to this chapter! TW for mild period-accurate homophobia. nothing severe, just teens being stupid

Will is exhausted the next day. Even though he got what he wanted in the end, he's unbelievably drained. It's been a long time since he had a night that was so emotional- since he *allowed* himself to feel so much. Still, he tries to enjoy it.

He talks with Hannibal in the few minutes they have before their English teacher announces a pop quiz. Hannibal notices that Will looks tired and Will shrugs it off. It really isn't his business anyway, though he can tell that the other boy wants to press further.

The two of them have been talking a lot lately. About everything, anything, nothing. It's easy, talking with Hannibal. There's less awkward friction between them than there was before.

Usually.

Something about Hannibal Lecter still puts him on edge, though. Not just ordinary social anxiety, but something *else.* Something strange and nauseating and *new.* He tries to ignore it whenever he can.

He's already writing the good news to Bev when she sits down at her desk in Health class, tapping the desk arrhythmically in his excitement. Will had been expecting this change to bear fruit a week from now, or maybe two, so he's both shocked and happy when Bev says 'Awesome! Let's all go out today.'

Going out with friends. He's actually, really going out with friends after school. He should be kicking his feet under his desk by now, but he's mainly just focusing on the clock. A few more hours, he thinks to himself. Just a few more hours to go.

Unfortunately nothing makes time move slower quite like anticipation. He's counting every last lingering second, and by lunchtime he feels like he's lived through an entire week already. At least time is moving, though. Each grueling minute, it is undeniably moving forward.

When he approaches his and Hannibal's table, the entire world comes to a stop so suddenly that he's lucky he doesn't get whiplash.

'What's this?'

Hannibal barely looks up from his lunch, following Will's gaze to the small blue container. It's right in front of Will's usual spot, accompanied by a bottle of water.

'It's a pita wrap, with chicken and vegetables. There's a cilantro drizzle on the side- I personally enjoy cilantro, but-'

'This is for me?'

Hannibal nods.

Will sits slowly, popping open the container. It's identical to Hannibal's lunch. It smells amazing. His stomach growls.

'Why?' He signs. The sour weight of guilt is spreading through him in an instant, alongside a note of offended embarrassment.

He's expecting Hannibal to say something about his financial situation, or about Will's home life. It makes him angry, being pitied. Wounds his pride.

'Why not? You're my friend, aren't you?'

'I never said you were my friend.'

Hannibal sighs sharply, more exasperated than hurt. *'You said you don't eat until you and your father are finished at the docks- I don't like the idea of that. You should have lunch.'*

Heat rushes up the back of his neck. There it is. He cringes at the thought- Hannibal asking his uncle to cook a second lunch for the charity case at his school. His uncle dutifully complying despite the inconvenience because the poor boy is skin and bones. He sighs.

I'm not hungry,' he lies.

Hannibal looks at him. His big brown eyes seem to study Will's features with a near clinical intensity. There's a softness in his expression.

'At least try it,' Hannibal insists. *'I used a new marinade for the chicken, I'm curious what you think.'*

Will freezes.

***'You** made this?'*

Hannibal nods. *'I always make my own meals. My uncle took me in, gave me a home. I cook for the both of us- breakfast, lunch, and dinner.'* he smiles softly. *'It's the least I can do.'*

Will's mouth goes dry. That's the most Hannibal's ever mentioned about his family. It feels odd, being let in on this small piece of the other boy's life. New. It makes him feel happy and sick at the same time.

He picks up the wrap, takes a large bite. It's free food, either way. He might as well.

He makes a sound of approval around his mouthful, nodding as he chews.

'It's good.' he signs before taking another bite. *'You're a good cook.'*

Hannibal grins. *'Thank you.'* The other boy is still for a moment, watching him. Will feels his face grow hot under the attention.

'What?'

His posture goes straight almost immediately, eyes flicking down to the table.

'...I could make you lunch again tomorrow, if you'd like.'

Will frowns at him. *'You don't need to do that, Hannibal.'*

'It's no trouble,' Hannibal insists quickly. *'I'm already making lunch for Uncle and myself, making an additional portion for you wouldn't be an inconvenience.'*

He falters. He'd been expecting Hannibal to be relieved- he's only offering out of obligation, after all.

Isn't he?
'What are you getting out of this, exactly?'

Hannibal's face goes blank. Will notices how his cheeks go a bit pink.

'Nothing, really.'

Will arches a brow.

'...I like cooking for you. I like seeing you enjoy what I make. It makes me happy. It's as simple as that, there's no ulterior motive in play.'

He swallows. His heart is fluttering without his permission, and it makes every motion feel stilted, awkward. Will is left with the ridiculous feeling that he's lost control of his body, somehow. He tries to take a slow breath, to calm his sudden nerves. It doesn't help.

Hannibal is watching him from the corner of his eye. He lifts a hand and rubs at the back of his neck. Will's theory is confirmed when his hands move on their own.

'What are you making tomorrow?'

-

"He did *what?"*

Will nods, gesturing to the written words as if they speak for themselves.

"Hannibal Lecter made you lunch, and you actually *ate it?"* Jimmy reconfirms.

Will nods. **'It's not the first time I've tried his cooking. It's good.'**

Bev makes a face. "Okay."

He frowns at her. *'What?'* he signs, and she shrugs.

"It's just weird, I don't know."

He touches the pad of his little finger to his thumb, flexes the other three fingers while moving his hand across his body.

" 'Weird?' " Bev asks, mimicking the sign as she says it.

Will nods. *'Weird how?'*

She sits back in their booth, blowing a lock of raven hair from her face. "I don't know, man. It's just-"

"It's kind of gay, isn't it?"

Will, Bev, and Jimmy all pause. Brian doesn't even look up from his Reuben. When he finally notices that the others are staring at him, he shrugs.

"I'm just saying what everyone's thinking!" he insists after he swallows. "I mean, didn't he do a weird drawing of you a couple weeks ago?"

Bev nods, reaching for another onion ring. "There's a note on the back, too."

Jimmy quirks a brow. "What's the note say, Will?"

Bev snorts at Will's response.

"What did he say?"

"He told you to go fuck yourself."

"You agree with me, though," Brian says. "Lecter's got a gay crush on Will."

Bev looks down. "I mean I wasn't gonna say it like *that."*

Will shoots Bev an accusatory look. **'You're agreeing with him?'**

"I mean, there's *something* weird about him."

Will rolls his eyes.

"You're like, the only person he talks to, Will. You don't think there's anything strange about that?"

'We just speak the same language!'

Brian snorts. "Yeah, you see me cooking meals for everyone I meet who knows Klingon?"

"You would if you ever met one."

"...Yeah, I probably would."

"Alright, fine," Jimmy says. "So maybe he isn't gay. Has he ever talked to you about girls?"

Will bites his tongue. Shakes his head. He feels his neck getting hot and tries to push it down. Hannibal doesn't have a *crush* on Will. He doesn't. And even if Hannibal does like boys, why does it matter to them?

Luckily, something catches Jimmy's eye before their speculation about Hannibal Lecter can continue. "Speaking of girls," he says, nodding to a space behind Will's shoulder, "You see that chick with the ponytail at your six o'clock?"

Will turns in the booth, looking toward the entrance of the diner. Four girls from their school are headed for a booth near the window- Margot Verger among them. He recognizes the one Jimmy is referring to. She's a cheerleader. Margot's friend. Will turns back to the group, and nods.

"Her name's Alana Bloom. You know her?"

He shakes his head. Jimmy leans closer, voice dropping low. "Well, one of my old buddies in the marching band said she heard Alana talking about you on the bus to the last away game. She said she thought you were cute."

Will furrows his brows, casting a quick glance their way. *'Really?'*

Bev scoffs, crossing her arms. "Yeah, well she thought Ricky Chilton was cute when he broke his leg last year, too. And Peter Bernadone, when his pet bird died." She sends a pointed look to Will. "And Lecter, when he first moved here."

"So?"

"I'm just saying, I think she has a thing for guys she can feel sorry for." She coughs awkwardly. "Not that she should feel sorry for you, Will. I just mean- whatever, she gets off on the idea of being a martyr, it's weird."

Brian chuckles. "Well, I'd gladly snap a couple fingers if it got me a piece of her-"

"She's coming over here."

"Shit!" Brian sits up straight, trying to adjust his clothes and covertly dust away any stray crumbs.

"Hi, Will."

Will looks up at her. Alana Bloom is short, fit, with blue eyes and a sweet smile. She's pretty. He brings two fingers to his temple, salutes. She giggles.

"I'm Alana, it's nice to meet you. You're new around here, right?"

Will nods.

"What do you think, so far?"

He smirks. **'Solid 7 out of 10.'**

Alana laughs again. "Hey, that's a passing grade! I'll take it." She reaches for the end of her ponytail, twirling it around her index finger as she speaks. "Well, if you ever need help with anything, just let me know, okay?"

He nods again. **'Thanks.'**

"You know, we have the same lunch period, if you ever wanted to come sit with me and my friends. I know you usually...keep to yourself, but you don't have to."

Will narrows his eyes. **'I'm okay where I am, thanks. Why don't you come sit with me some time instead?'**

Her smile falls. "Oh, um. Maybe. I'll think about it."

Margot Verger approaches then, coming to stand just behind Alana's shoulder. "Hey Lana, Bella wants to know if you wanna split a slice of pie."

"Oh," she smiles back at Will. "It was nice meeting you. I'll see you around?"

He holds up a hand in farewell, watching as she walks back to her booth.

"Hey, by the way,"

Will frowns up at Margot. He realizes that the two of them have never actually spoken. She shrugs her bag off of one shoulder, rummaging through it. "I found this lying in one of the chemistry labs. You must've forgotten it or something."

She drops a book onto the table in front of Will. 'The Reality of Terror'. The book Mason Verger stole from him.

"That's yours, right? You should be more careful with your shit, you could get in trouble if it goes missing."

Will looks at her. Her cherry red lips curl into a small smirk.

'Yes, it's mine. Thank you.'

Margot shrugs it off. "No worries," she says, and winks before striding after Alana.

"Unbelievable," Brian says once they've left earshot. "Two of the coolest girls in school just talked to you back-to-back. Do you have any idea what id give to be you right now?"

Will just chuckles, opening the book. There's a note inside, written in curly handwriting.

'Don't let Mason fuck with you. If he tries to jack your shit again, let me know and I'll get for you. Us freaks gotta stick together, right? -Margot'

"What are you gonna do?"

Will looks up at Brian. Brian rolls his eyes.

"About *Alana,* Will. You think she's hot, right?"

He thinks it over. She's definitely pretty. He tries to imagine kissing her. To picture himself leaning close, cupping her face, *zing! A resurrection-*

He shrugs. **'I guess so.'**

Brian shakes his head. "Fuck, I don't even want to know what kind of Bettys they have in Cedar Rapids if Alana Bloom isn't a ten." He narrows his eyes. "You do *like* girls, don't you?"

"Brian!" Bev hisses, and swats his shoulder.

'Why don't you ask Alana out, then, if she's such a Betty.'

Brian starts floundering for words, and the other three teens laugh. Will snags an onion ring from Bev's plate.

"Arent you gonna order something for yourself?" She teases.

He shakes his head, smirking.

'Not hungry.'

Jump Start

Chapter Notes

> As a man who knows nothing about cars i will Not be accepting criticism or information about Cars At This Time
>
> CW Some mentions of internalized homophobia in this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's almost impressive how quickly the parking lot empties itself. One moment, it's filled to bursting with busses, and cars either driven by students or parents of students, and bikes. A few minutes of loitering later and it's nearly vacant. The only ones that remain are either faculty or students hanging back for extracurriculars.

Or, if you're Will, you remain because you're waiting for your friend's friend to stop gossiping about Freddie-fucking-Lounds and cutting into your precious free time.

He likes them. He does. Well, he likes Beverly, at least. Brian and Jimmy are...growing on him. Slowly. Surely, but slowly.

Will flicks his head, shaking some stray hair from his face. He and Bev are leaning on the hood of her car, people watching to kill a few more minutes until Bev finally drags Jimmy into her backseat. He frowns. There's a car parked by itself on the other end of the lot, sputtering sadly as it tries again and again to start. It's a nice car, a dark blue two-seater with sharp lines.

"I'm literally going to leave their asses."

Will snorts, eyes still fixed on the car. The breeze in the parking lot picks up, and he pushes his hair back in frustration.

"You wanna borrow a scrunchie?"

He frowns at her, and she pulls a blue hair tie from around her wrist. He holds up a hand in refusal.

'I don't know how to do that.'

She catches enough. Probably just 'I don't know', but it's enough. "I'll do it for you. C'mere."

Will rolls his eyes, but turns away from her obediently. She gathers up his hair, tugging at it a little as she ties it into a small ponytail. There are still a few loose locks near his face that weren't long enough to fit into the band, but it's certainly much more contained.

"Better?"

He looks at himself in Bev's side mirror. Turns his head this way and that. It suits him better than he thought it would. He lifts a brow at her.

'It looks okay?' he signs. He isn't sure how much ASL she actually knows by now, so it's a relief when she laughs.

"You look cool, Will. Maybe if it gets a little longer you'll let me braid it."

Luckily, the middle finger is something of a universal sign. Beverly punches him on the shoulder.

The old car tries to start again. Will narrows his eyes. It's far off, but if he focuses he can just make out a familiar silhouette behind the wheel. Before he can talk himself out of it, he pushes himself off the hood and starts across the parking lot.

"Hey, where are you going?"

Will looks to her, then back to the car.

'You go on without me. I'll see you tomorrow.'

"You sure?" When Will nods, she shrugs. "Okay. See you, Will."

He's already half-running over to the car. As he gets closer, he slows, trying to maintain a casual air.

Hannibal is scowling at the dash, his features a picture of dawning despair. Will knocks twice on his passenger side window. The other boy's face softens when he sees Will, and Will can't help but smile.

'Car trouble?' he signs through the window.

Hannibal nods sheepishly. *'It won't start.'*

His smile grows. *'Yeah, I noticed. You want me to take a look at it?'*

'You don't need to do that.'

Will waves him off. *'Pop the hood. I'll see if I can figure out what's wrong.'*

He tucks one of the stubborn strands behind his ear, shrugging out of his flannel and tying the sleeves in a knot around his waist. The hood is still shut. When he looks at Hannibal through the window, he's staring at Will- his brown eyes wide and settled on Will's arms where they rest awkwardly at his sides.

Will frowns. *'You don't know how to pop your hood?'*

Hannibal blinks, quickly looking away. A flush rises on his cheeks. Will curses himself. Shit, he's embarrassed him. Why did he say that? He likes talking to Hannibal, but lately he's so *bad* at it- every single thing seems to come out wrong.

Hannibal starts to fumble for the latch, and Will rounds the car, opening the driver's side door and reaching over Hannibal to trigger the mechanism for him. He smiles gently at the other boy once the hood is up, trying his best to look reassuring.

'Sorry,' Hannibal signs, and Will shakes his head quickly. Maybe a bit too quickly? Shit. He swallows, looking down at the inner workings of the car and trying to regain his bearings. He leans around the hood to sign at Hannibal.

'Try to start it again.'

He sighs in relief when he recognizes the problem. Insignificant and easy to solve. He leans against the open door, looking down at Hannibal with a pleased expression. Hannibal still looks embarrassed.

'Good news, your battery just needs a jump. You don't happen to have any jumper cables, do you?'

Hannibal furrows his brows. *'Uncle may have put a set in the trunk, for emergencies.'*

Will nods, tugging at his T-shirt a bit awkwardly. *'Yeah, that's...usually a good idea.'* Why, *why is he like this?*

Luckily, Hannibal's Uncle had been smart enough to put some jumper cables into the trunk, which meant Will only needed to find another willing driver to help out. A cursory scan of the nearly-empty parking lot revealed that pickings were slim, and he found himself wishing he'd asked Bev to stick around.

A small white car catches his eye. It isn't ideal. He'd only noticed this car once, when Mason Verger was stalking his way back to it after being scolded by his older sister. Still, best to take what he's given.

'Wait here,' he signs, as if Hannibal has anywhere to go. He nearly smacks himself on the forehead for that. Will is smart, but something about Hannibal Lecter has been making him so stupid lately. It's only getting worse over time, by Spring Break Will wouldn't be surprised if he outright insulted him by accident.

He whistles when he gets close, and Margot turns to look at him. There's another car next to hers- Alana Bloom's, judging by the way the cheerleader is leaning on it. Alana waves at him.

"Hey, Will! What's up?"

Will shrugs off his bag. As he grabs the small notebook from the front pocket, he looks through the window of Margot's car. Empty. He tries to disguise his pleasant surprise, and Margot smiles.

"Mason's got detention," she says, clearly reading his mind. "Skipped Bio and got caught."

Will snorts.

'Do you think you could pull your car around for me? Hannibal needs a jump.'

She looks off to the other end of the lot, already grabbing her keys from her bag. When she speaks, she leans close to him and speaks low.

"Playing Prince Charming, Will?"

Will coughs. He feels his face go hot. He grips his pen, ready to clarify... whatever the hell Margot thinks she's implying-

"Relax, I'm just kidding." She slaps the hood of her car twice. "Pile in, I got you."

Hannibal is waiting when the three of them pull around- why Alana decided to tag along is beyond him, but it really isn't his business- cables in hand. Will takes them while Margot lifts her hood.

'Hold these ones for me,' he signs to Hannibal before he takes the other pair. *'And don't let them touch, yeah?'*

Hannibal nods, keeping his hands apart. Will smiles approvingly.

Once both of the vehicles are hooked up it's just a matter of waiting. It won't take long, though, and it's only three o'clock. His afternoon is suddenly very free after leaving Bev and the guys. Maybe he could get some fishing in.

'Will?'

Will looks over to Hannibal. *'Yeah?'*

'Thank you, for your help.'

He just shrugs, hoping that the heat on his neck is just the afternoon sun. *'It's really not a big deal.'*

'I don't know the first thing about cars,' he insists. *'I would have been stranded if you hadn't been here.'*

Will smiles. His chest goes tight without his permission. *'Guess it's a good thing I stuck around, then.'*

"Hey, Will?"

He turns to see Alana approaching.

"You know, me and Margot were talking about going to see a movie today. And I was thinking, you know, if you're not doing anything, maybe you could come with us?"

'What are you seeing?'

She wrinkles her nose. " 'Lawnmower Man'? I don't know, we're just going to *go* somewhere. You in?"

Will thinks it over. He's heard about that movie- it's supposedly the exact sort of bizarre that he enjoys. He would probably be a bit late coming home, but when his dad heard that he'd been out with two pretty girls, he'd probably cut Will some slack.

Will looks sidelong to Hannibal. He seems a bit disheartened, and it makes Will frown in confusion. *'What's up? You don't want to go?'*

Hannibal blinks. *'You want me to come along?'*

Will swallows. *'If you'd like to, yeah.'*

His mood brightens in a flash. That wide grin makes an appearance and Will somehow feels much better and worse. *'Why not? It can be my first taste of science fiction.'*

Alana looks confused and a bit annoyed that she can't follow their conversation, so he lets her in.

'We're in. Meet y'all there?'

Her brows lift. "Oh, both of you are coming?" She hesitates for a moment, but Will doesn't budge. "Well, alright. Yeah, see you there."

-

Hannibal's car is clean. Smells good, too. A/C's busted, though, but Will is more than happy to roll the window down and enjoy the fresh air rushing by. He watches the scenery. Hannibal doesn't turn on the radio, but the silence between them is never awkward. It can't be, with no expectation of it being filled.

When they come to a red light, Will looks over to the driver. Hannibal is smiling to himself.

'You know, I just realized this is the first time we've hung out outside of school.'

Hannibal watches his hands, eyes flicking up every few seconds to see if the light has changed.

'I'm glad.'

Will grins. *'I have Thursday afternoons off. Usually I hang out with Beverly Katz, but... we could hang out again sometime, if you wanted.'*

Hannibal's eyes are practically sparkling. *'Yes. I'd like that.'*

A small wave of anxiety hits him then. He clears his throat. *'Yeah, I mean, Bev's friends are kind of assholes, so...'* he trails off.

The light changes. The silence actually does feel awkward, now, but it feels like it's more Will than anything else.

-

Will is more anxious than ever when he sits in the back of the dark theatre. Alana is on his right, Hannibal at his left. He tries to take a breath, to push everything aside and just enjoy the movie.

Hannibal paid for his ticket. Hadn't even asked first. Will was prepared to buy his own, to break into the cash hidden in his pencil case, but Hannibal beat him to the punch. He tried to offer to pay him back, and the other boy hadn't even entertained it.

'Compensation,' he'd called it. *'For fixing my car.'* Well, what was Will meant to say to that?

It didn't matter. Hannibal was just being nice. He's a very nice person, especially to Will. Patient and attentive, always willing to listen when Will got caught up in his hyperfixations. And he's generous- making lunches for Will and paying attention to what he likes best. Not that any of his cooking *ever* goes unfinished. He feels healthier than he has in ages, he doesn't get dizzy as much and he's sleeping better.

He takes a breath. Focus on the movie, Will.

Hannibal's elbow is propped on their shared armrest. He's observing the screen with an endearing sort of focus, almost like he's expecting there to be a test afterwards. Will finds himself wondering if Hannibal is formulating talking points, ready for Will to bombard him the second the credits roll.

"Lecter's got a gay crush on Will."

Will cringes at the memory. That comment has been orbiting his brain for two weeks now. Stupid Zeller, what does he know anyway? Hannibal doesn't have a crush on him. He's just nice. And a bit weird. But Will is a weird, too. He's comfortable with weird. The other kids, they just don't *get* Hannibal the way Will does. They understand each other. And the idea that he would have a crush on *Will* of all people? That Hannibal would take a second glance at him, that his heart skipped a beat when he was around, that Will had somehow worked his way into his daydreams-

Ridiculous. The whole idea is Ridiculous.

Does he look at Will differently than anyone else? Sometimes he thinks so. Sometimes he looks at the portraits in Hannibal's sketchbook and mentally compares them to the drawing in his bag and thinks that maybe...maybe it's different. That maybe Hannibal found Will special, somehow. Not different or odd, but special. Rare.

Hannibal looks at him from the corner of his eye, his face soft in the darkness with the flickering of the screen shifting over his sharp features. Handsome features. Not that Will's ever thought about it.

He forces his eyes to snap forward. Fuck, he'd just been caught staring. Although surely Hannibal wouldn't think of it as *staring,* necessarily. Just that Will happened to be looking. Coincidentally.

And it *was* coincidental. Because Will was *not* interested in boys- Hannibal Lecter or any others for that matter. He'd reassured himself of this fact many, many times in the past few years. Whenever the idea crept to the back of his mind- whenever he saw men on magazine covers at the supermarket, or noticed the other boys in the locker room, or paid *way* too much attention to Johnny Depp in 'A Nightmare on Elm Street'- it was immediately and aggressively banished. He just hadn't ever paid much attention to girls, that's all. And that was mutual. He ignored girls, girls ignored him. Even Steven.

Alana Bloom is sitting beside him. Alana Bloom likes him, so the rumor goes. She said that she thought he was cute. And she's pretty, and popular, and friendly. She invited Will here- with Margot and Hannibal in tow, yes, but she'd still *invited* him. Had she been trying to ask him out on a date? Is Will meant to be thinking in circles about *her* right now?

She shifts in her seat, leans closer to Will. Will could drape an arm around her shoulders, easily. Maybe she would blush, maybe she would lean into his side. Maybe they would kiss and maybe he would like it. Maybe he could have his first girlfriend, and maybe love would feel like the poets said it would.

Hannibal sets his hand on the armrest, and when Will looks at it he feels like he's been shocked. *Shot full of these electric bolts. Zing! A resurrection!*

Will realizes all at once that he's never touched Hannibal. Maybe a brush in passing, here or there, but not nearly enough to commit to his memory. Does he run warm? Is he as strong as he looks? How would his hands feel against his skin? If Will took his hand, right now, would he thread their fingers together, squeezing tightly? Would he hold on, and worry that Will would pull away? Would Will hold tight, too?

His palms are sweating. He feels sick, scared, feverish. *Darling, the composer has stepped into fire.*

Oh, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

God how embarrassing imagine having your gay awakening during Lawnmower Man
Will never gets a break

Just

Chapter Notes

> Big TW on this chapter for Verbal and Emotional Child Abuse, as well as Homophobia and Ableism. This is a very emotionally intense chapter and the last thing I want is for it to trigger a reader, so please use your discretion and maybe have a fluff fic ready for when you're done <3
>
> If you're following along with this fic and want/need to skip this chapter, I'll provide a very brief summary of what happened in the endnotes so that you have context without having to read it all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will's having some...trouble focusing, lately.

His grades are slipping a bit. Not enough for anyone to give a shit, but some. B pluses instead of As, that sort of thing. He gets through books a bit slower, he rewinds parts of his audiobooks-sometimes more than once. Fish slip off his hooks. His mind can't seem to stay on task, preferring instead to wander between the winding paths of his life and get lost in the pale camelia blossoms planted there. It's so unlike him. Usually he's trying to escape his daily life at all costs, but lately it seems like reality has made a whirlpool of itself, drawing him inwards.

He has a crush on Hannibal Lecter. Maybe. He thinks so? It makes his stomach tie itself into knots to even think about it, but it's the only thing that seems to stay reliably on his mind. And Will's *liked* people before. He never got to know any of them all that well, but he liked them. Or at least he *thought* he did, but it definitely wasn't like *this,* and this is-

What is it, exactly? Either every crush he's ever had wasn't actually a crush, or what he feels for Hannibal isn't a crush. Occam's Razor, Will, what makes more sense? So it isn't a crush. It's just...

Just.

The feelings he has for Hannibal Lecter- the anxious, buzzing excitement when they're together, and the pleasant balloon in his chest when the other boy looks his way, and the warmth that settles in his bones when he smiles- they're all Just.

Which would all be...fine. Just would be fine, if it wasn't so damn distracting. It's impossible to think, though, with so much Just in the way.

"Willy."

Will jumps, looking up at him. His father's hands grip the steering wheel like he thinks he can strangle it, eyes staring straight ahead.

'I'm sorry,' he signs. He is. Usually he has to lie about it, but what happened today actually was his fault.

His and Hannibal Lecter's, anyway.

His dad just takes a slow breath through his nose. "Go inside."

Will doesn't think, he just obeys. Grabs his bag and unlocks the door, slips inside. Sits on the couch and waits.

'The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear,' Lovecraft said, and Will agrees. He knows fear. The type of fear that makes him understand why humans learned to run in the first place.

Lovecraft went on to say that the oldest and strongest type of fear was the fear of the Unknown. That's where Will begs to differ.

He knows, from a lifetime of experience and an eons-old instinct, *exactly* what is coming.

It was his fault. He hadn't *meant* for it to happen, but it was definitely his fault. He'd been helping his dad work on an engine, replacing an old compressor. And Will had been distracted, careless, stupid. He'd been thinking about Hannibal fucking Lecter, *again,* instead of actually using his head. He hadn't tightened the bolts enough. It was such a simple mistake, a *stupid* mistake, and when they tried to get the damn thing running again, the whole compressor just...

Popped.

They'll have to order a new one, and lose valuable time doing it, and their client will be upset, and it's all Will's fault.

Will shuts his eyes when the door swings open. Braces for impact.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

'I'm sorry-'

Will hisses when his hand is smacked down, shoulders pulled taut.

"I didn't ask if you were sorry, I asked you what the fuck's gotten into you."

'I don't know,' he lies. *'I don't know, I'm sorry.'*

His father huffs, standing over him. "I just don't know where your head is! You're slacking off at work, Willy. I can't have that. I need you present- is that clear?"

Will sighs. *'Yes, sir-'*

Another slap. "Look at me when I'm fucking talking to you."

He keeps his eyes closed for a second, trying hard to banish the tears stinging behind his lids. He looks up at his father, impossibly large from where Will sits beneath him. Will wonders if he could block out the sun, like this.

'Yes, sir.'

His dad's mouth twists. Not angry or disappointed, *disgusted.*

"You're not going out with those friends of yours again, either."

Will narrows his eyes. *'But dad-'*

"Those kids are a bad influence on you, Willy. They've got you too distracted, they take up all your time- hell, I didn't even see you until I got home on Thursday!"

'You said that was okay-'

"They're fucking up your priorities! Ever since we moved here, you've been testing my patience and I'm **sick** of it! I don't know what ideas they're putting in your head but you're not grown, do you hear me? You answer to me, I don't owe you shit."

Will sets his jaw. *'Maybe they are changing my priorities,'* he signs. He stands, frowning up at him. *'My friends actually **care** about me! The only reason you're mad is because they taught me that there are better things in life than always answering to you!'*

"Better things, huh?" He challenges, and Will honestly can't believe he said that. "Better things like what, Will? Like ignoring your responsibilities? Like letting down your family so you can go watch horror movies and read your faggy fucking poems?"

Will can't disguise how his eyes widen.

"Yeah, you thought I didn't notice what books you've been bringing home? You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were-"

'I'm not,' he swears, and fuck, the tears are finally spilling over-hot and salty where they roll down his face. *'I'm not, dad, I was just-'*

"Well I'm putting a stop to that shit, too. You're not filling your head with that crap anymore- it's making you soft."

'You can't do that!' he insists with shaking hands. *'You can't tell me what I can't read, or what I can do with my free time. I'm not a little kid anymore!'*

"You're acting like one!" His dad shouts. "Look at you, you're throwing a tantrum! You're not too fucking stupid to talk, and you're not too stupid to listen, are you?"

Will feels like he's been struck. The wind leaves his lungs. He lifts his hands to speak, and his dad grabs him by the wrist, tight enough to make him wince.

"Shut up and stop crying!"

To his despair, it has the opposite effect. He sobs, his hands trembling.

"Answer me. Tell me you're not too fucked in the head to listen when I tell you something, Willy."

Will tries to pull his hands away to answer, but the grip on his wrist only gets tighter. He frowns down at his father's hand through a teary haze, trying again to jerk his hand away.

"Tell me you're not stupid."

Will looks up at him, the reality of the command sinking right to the pit of his stomach. He shakes his head, more stubborn tears streaming down his face. No, oh God, no.

"Say it!" He yanks on Will's arm when he speaks, and Will sobs. He tries once more to pull away.

"Are you stupid, Will?! Are you?!"

"Nn-o," he chokes, hardly able to breathe through his sobs. It's awful, it *hurts.* It's enough.

The moment his hand is released he falls to the floor, arms wrapped tightly around himself. He curls into a ball, wishing more than anything that he could make himself smaller, smaller, until he fades from view.

The bedroom door shuts, leaving Will alone. Once the worst of it fades, once he can think again, he grabs his notebook from his bag. He sits on the couch, still curled with his knees near his chest, and writes. The only sounds in the room are Will's occasional sniffles, and his father's words echoing in his head.

-

'Will?'

He glances with weary eyes up at Hannibal.

'You aren't eating. Is there something wrong with the food?'

Will pushes the container away from himself with a sigh. *'I'm not hungry.'*

Hannibal gives him that *look* again. That soft, sad, caring look. He was wearing it this morning in English class too, when Will walked in looking like the devil dragged him out of bed. He's exhausted, and for good reason. Frayed at his edges. Sensitive, and he will be for a while. Once again Hannibal had asked if something was wrong, and once again Will had said he was just tired, and once again Hannibal clearly hadn't believed him.

'You should at least have a few bites. You need to eat.'

Will shrugs. *'I don't feel like it, alright?'*

The silence between them feels wrong. Sour. It makes Will feel...too much. He feels guilty, ashamed. He wants to apologize for his poor mood, to just get over it and eat Hannibal's food and feel better. He wants to throw his arms around Hannibal and cry into his shoulder and tell him everything. He wants Hannibal to wipe away his tears and kiss him softly until every shitty, stupid piece of his life just melts away. The tension radiating from Will is spreading between them- restrictive and hot and uncomfortable, like a too-tight sweater. Hannibal is staring at him.

'What?!'

'Are you sure you're okay?'

And a part of Will wants to tell the truth. To say 'No. I'm really, really not okay. I don't even know what okay looks like.'
'I told you, I'm fine.'

'Will.'

The second his hand touches Will's arm, he flinches away. The bruise barely hidden behind the sleeve of his flannel is tender, but the response is more from fear than pain. He's on his feet in an instant, making his way to the cafeteria exit.

He hides in the boys' bathroom, thankfully vacant. His back hits the wall as he tries to breathe through his frustration. Stupid Hannibal Lecter. This is all his fault. If Will hadn't been thinking about him at work, if he hadn't been reading the poets he liked, if Hannibal hadn't been so-

If Will didn't feel so-

Hannibal follows close behind, standing before Will when he arrives. *'I'm not stupid, Will,'* he signs.

'Congratulations.'

The other boy rolls his eyes. *'Won't you just talk to me? Something is clearly wrong.'*

Will shakes his head. Have the fluorescents always been so *loud* in here? He cuts the tags out of all of his clothes for times just like this, but the fabric of his shirt itself suddenly feels like it's drowning out every other sound. Will feels dizzy.

'You can tell me,' Hannibal coaxes, reaching out again. *'I'm your friend-'*

'You're not my fucking friend!'

Hannibal looks at him, those stupid brown eyes wide and distressed. Why, why can't everything just *stop?!* He'd never been happy with his life, but he was prepared to just keep his head down and get through it. All he ever wanted was to just get through. And then Hannibal ruined that- Hannibal ruined *everything!* And now Will doesn't know *what* he wants, and every feeling is too big, and it's all his fault.

'I don't need you! Why can't you just leave me alone?!' Will signs, and when Hannibal lifts his hands to reply, Will is too upset to think clearly.

The slap shocks them both. Hannibal flinches, his face confused and sad and *hurt.* Will feels horrible. His hands sting, from the impact of his palms striking Hannibal's knuckles or from outright shame, he can't really say. All of the anger drains from his body so quickly it leaves him woozy.

'Han, I-'

'If you wanted space, you only ever needed to ask,' Hannibal interrupts. His eyes are fixed on the ground, his muscles tense.

Will doesn't follow Hannibal when he leaves. Instead he lets his head fall back, his skull hitting the wall with a low 'thunk'. He hits his forehead with the heel of his palm once, twice, three times. He hides in the bathroom, cursing himself until the bell rings. He feels frustrated, sad, sorry. He feels broken. Unwanted. More than any of that, he feels profoundly, utterly stupid. It's too much. Too much to feel and too much to pretend he isn't feeling.

Just.

Chapter End Notes

Content summary: Will's father has an outburst in which he verbally abuses him, leaving Will fragile and exhausted. The next day Hannibal tries to help Will and make him open up, but he presses too hard and Will lashes out. His behavior echoes the actions of his father, and both of them end the chapter feeling upset and confused. (better things are coming, i promise <3)

Blooms, Like a Cut

Chapter Notes

The day I'm posting this update marks one year since I started writing HEU fics!!! thanks so much for a year of support <3

I'm SUPER nervous about this chapter so I really hope yall like it

Will is seriously considering faking a horrible illness.

It doesn't feel that far from the truth, either way. He might not be sick, but his stomach careens with the distinct feeling that the ground is going to open up and swallow him. Any minute now, any minute now. He's almost looking forward to it.

Hannibal isn't talking to him anymore. Well, Will hadn't exactly tried to start a conversation, but he never had to before. Today was different, though. Hannibal didn't sit with him during English class, for starters. Didn't distract him from the lesson or talk to him about literature when they were meant to be discussing the assignment. Just a few sideways glances and a moment of lingering eye contact as he left for his next class.

That should've been Will's cue to clear the air, talk it out, get over himself and fucking *apologize.* He owes Hannibal that much. He didn't mean to hurt Hannibal, he was just upset and overwhelmed. He wants to make it right.

And yet, he spent their lunch period hiding in a bathroom stall, feeling anxious and guilty and more than a little cowardly. He feels so far out of his depth. Will's never liked someone like this, and he'd fucked it up before he could even find his footing. He wants to make it better. He wants Hannibal to give him that sharp, cute smile that sends his heart ricocheting like a pinball around his ribcage. He wants Hannibal to *like* him, and he's never given a shit about being liked but if Hannibal stays mad at him he might die.

It's all he can think about the whole day through, and by the time he's trudging through the parking lot he just wants to skip class tomorrow. Or never go back. Maybe he'll come home to find his and his dad's suitcases packed up and ready to go, and he can disappear without a trace.

He's walking with his head down, wondering how many days it would take for Hannibal to notice that he was gone, when he nearly runs into another body. Will glances up, ready to sidestep and continue on his way, and his heart drops.

"Hey Will," Mason Verger says.

Will only glares at him. Mason isn't worth his time, regardless of what the other boy clearly thinks. He picks on Will often, but it's nothing he hasn't heard before. He's just a nuisance, at the end of the day. Will isn't afraid of him.

"I heard you've been hanging out with Alana." Mason smiles. "Good for you."

He shrugs. That's true, technically.

"I hope you're not trying to go after her, though. That would be *so* embarrassing— for Alana, I mean."

Will almost laughs. There is nothing further from his mind than romantically pursuing Alana Bloom, but if Mason wants to act jealous, then that's his choice.

He steps closer. "She's only talking to you because she thinks you're pathetic, you know. That's the only reason anyone talks to you. They feel bad for you because you're fucked up."

Mason pushes him, then. and Will stumbles back. He grits his teeth. Come on, universe, not today. Surely he could reschedule? "What did you do, huh? I bet you lost your voice because you did something, just like your little boyfriend. Is that it? Are you fucked up, like Lecter is?"

Oh, big mistake. Big fucking mistake. He takes a sharp breath, fists tightly clenched. Be cool, Will. Just keep your head down, and walk away.

He turns on his heel and Mason yanks him backwards by the strap of his backpack. "Hey, I'm talking to you!"

Will tries to shrug him away, glaring back at him.

"Just because you're following my sister around doesn't mean you're less of a loser, Graham. It just means you're as much of a freak as she is! But hey, at least Margot's not *homeless."*

Deep breath, Will. Don't fight back. If you fight back, you both get in trouble.

He moves to shoulder past him, and Mason pushes him again. "That's why you're here, isn't it? Your parents can't afford to send you to a stupid kid school, where you belong?"

The wind leaves him when Mason's fist makes contact with his face. His head gets knocked sideways, his teeth sinking into the flesh of his tongue. His mouth fills with the metallic flavor of blood.

Don't fight back, don't fight back.

"Rent too high at the psych ward?"

This punch lands in his stomach. Will coughs, pink spit splattering on the parking lot. The world is spinning around him.

"Fucking say something, Graham!"

Mason pushes him again, and the next thing he knows he's on his back. There's a soft crunch beneath him, and he grits his teeth. Shit, he landed on his backpack. His tape player, it's probably busted. Can't he have *anything?*

Will braces himself, for another insult or another blow he can't quite say. He'll never know which one was coming, though, because a moment later a blur enters his swimming vision and tackles Mason to the ground. Will sits up slightly, propping himself up on his palm, and gasps at the sight that meets him.

Hannibal is on top of Mason, his usually neat hair falling in his face. His eyes are dark, his posture tensed. Will's never thought much about the other boy's muscles beyond how well they fill his button-downs, but his strength is suddenly on full display. Hannibal snarls, hits Mason— again, again, again.

Will watches, paralyzed in place. Mason isn't even fighting back anymore. He tried, but Hannibal didn't let up. He hears another unpleasant crunch. Some part of Will is aware that Hannibal is going too far. That he should get up, pull Hannibal away, stop him.

Mason Verger is an asshole. He is cruel to dozens of their peers, Will included. And as he sits there, watching Hannibal Lecter beat him to a pulp, Will thinks of all of the other assholes at past schools. Bullies and bitches and closed-minded people who only wanted to push others around and never once got punished for *any* of it. He thinks of his father.

He watches.

"Oh my god, Mason!"

It's Alana Bloom. The sound of rushed footsteps barely makes it past the odd ringing in his ears.

It's Margot who pushes Hannibal off of Mason. For a second, Will's scared that he's going to hurt her for breaking it up, but when he looks up at her it's like a switch goes off in his head. The rage leaks from his face, leaving the Hannibal that Will is accustomed to in its place. "Lecter!" she says. "What the fuck's gotten into you, man?"

Alana is kneeling next to Mason. She's crying. "Oh god, you— You broke his nose, you psycho!"

Margot is still crouched in front of Hannibal. "Hey, calm down. What happened?"

Hannibal looks back at him, then. Will wipes at his bloody mouth, still frozen solid where he sits. Margot follows his gaze, and her face changes in an instant. "Shit, are you okay, Will?" She asks, and Hannibal is already striding over to him.

Will nods, first to Margot and then to Hannibal when he stands over him. Hannibal smiles gently, violence hidden away, and Will's heart flutters.

'Everything's alright now, Will. Come with me. I'll take a look at your face for you.'

Hannibal offers him his hand, and Will can barely breathe. He takes it, gripping it tightly as he makes his unsteady way to his feet.

"Um, you guys should probably get out of here," Margot says. "My parents are going to be...well, 'pissed' doesn't even begin to describe it."

He raises his hands to argue, and Margot gives him a serious look. "Just go, Will. Now."

Will just nods, dumbfounded. He's disoriented, still blindly clutching Hannibal's hand as he leads Will away and towards his car.

-

Hannibal's house is large, pretty, clean. It's almost exactly as Will pictured it, sans the white picket fence. He notices that Hannibal's is the only car parked in the garage and assumes that his uncle must not be home, which is a blessing. He can't imagine having to meet Hannibal's guardian like *this.* Or at all, for that matter.

He leads Will to the kitchen, a spacious room with marble countertops and more appliances than Will would know what to do with. Hannibal reaches up and pulls a tall glass from a cabinet, then fills it with cool water.

'Rinse out your mouth,' he instructs once Will has taken the glass. *'Try to avoid swallowing any blood.'*

Will does as he's told, meanwhile Hannibal fetches a first aid kit from beneath the sink. Hannibal gestures for Will to sit on the counter.

'Are you alright? None of your teeth were damaged, were they?'

He shakes his head before spitting pink into the basin. Coppery. *My mouth blooms, like a cut.*

'I'm fine. I just bit my tongue, that's all. Do I... do I look okay— I mean, is my face fucked up?'

Hannibal steps close. Will flinches when warm fingertips brush the tender crescent beneath his left eye. It hurts, but he feels guilty when Hannibal pulls his hand away.

'You'll have a black eye, but you'll be alright.' He frowns to himself. *'You fell. Did you scrape anything?'*

Will looks down at his hands. *'My palm, a little.'* He groans. *'My backpack broke my fall. I think I broke my cassette player.'*

Hannibal scowls at the countertop. *'Mason should have to buy you a new one.'*

He snorts. *'If he doesn't send you a hospital bill, I'll call it even.'*

Hannibal doesn't respond. Will sighs.

'You're gonna get crucified for that, you know,' Will signs, watching as Hannibal pulls a few ice cubes from the freezer and wraps them in a soft hand towel. *'You'll be lucky if you aren't expelled.'*

'I couldn't just sit back and watch him hurt you, Will. Especially since you weren't fighting back.' Hannibal leans close again, pressing the cloth to Will's bruised cheekbone. He makes an effort to keep from flinching this time.

Will rolls his eyes, but he can feel that he's blushing. *'You're not supposed to fight back. If you fight back, then you both get in trouble. If you don't, then only the other kid gets punished. Usually, anyway.'* He sighs. *'The best thing to do is just keep your head down, and wait for it to pass. They'll tire themselves out eventually. They always do.'*

And Hannibal gives him that...look, again. The soft, slightly sad one. Will melts.

'Han?'

'Yes?'

'...I'm sorry, you know. For what I said the last time we talked.'

He just nods, looking him over with endearing focus as he holds the ice to Will's face.

'I didn't mean it. You... you are my friend.' Will looks down at the counter, his cheeks burning even under the ice. *'Honestly, you're probably one of the best friends I've ever had... Is that weird?'*

Hannibal shakes his head, smiling softly. *'No. I feel the same way, Will.'*

Wills smiles back. *'I really am sorry.'*

'I forgive you.'

His smile falls when he looks down and notices Hannibal's fingers. *'Your hands,'* he signs, nodding down to them. 'Your knuckles are bloody.'

Hannibal takes stock of himself. He doesn't seem overly affected by the realization. He offers Will the bundle of ice.

'Press this to your face. It will help reduce the swelling.'

Will watches him rinse his hands with cool water, then disinfect the scrapes on his knuckles. When Hannibal moves to grab the roll of bandages, Will beats him to it and sets the ice pack aside. He wraps Hannibal's knuckles— slowly, tenderly, the other boy's hand held in his own. Once it's wrapped, he expects Hannibal to back away. He doesn't. Will's eyes flick up to meet his, and the warmth he finds there makes his heart pound.

He panics. Looks away, pulls back. *'You didn't have to do that.'*

'Are you referring to me soothing your bruise, or breaking Mason Verger's nose?'

'Both, I guess. And you didn't have to make me lunch, either. Or read my books or— or talk to me, for that matter.'

Hannibal huffs in amusement. *'I wasn't under the impression that I did have to, Will. I do those things because I want to do them.'*

Will pushes his hair out of his face restlessly. *'I'm not really used to this,'* he admits.

'Having friends?'

He swallows. *'Being seen.'*

For one breath, the room is completely still. So still that he almost worries he's upset Hannibal. Then, Will feels a pair of lips ghost over his own. Just a brush, but it's enough to send every nerve on Will's body on end. *Zing! A resurrection.* Hannibal sighs softly, and his warm breath hits Will's face. Their lips are no longer touching, but Hannibal hasn't pulled away. He's waiting for Will to react, he realizes. Waiting to see if Will is going to run for his life, hit him, insult him for kissing him-

Kissing him. They just...they just kissed. Hannibal *kissed* him. His first kiss. *Before today, my body was useless. Now it's tearing at its square corners.*

This time it's Will who leans in. He kisses Hannibal, short and soft and terrified. A small sound rises up Hannibal's throat, something like relief and elation. Hannibal kisses him back, his broad palm coming up to cup Will's unwounded cheek.

Will's heart is pounding, his face is burning, his body is buzzing with a nervous energy that fights its way up his throat. He grips Hannibal's shoulder with shaking fingers, trying to steady himself. This time when they part, Hannibal pulls back enough to look Will in the eye. Whatever he sees in Will's face must be good, because he smiles. He tucks a lock of hair behind Will's ear, the tips of his fingers lingering near his jaw before finally leaving. Will finds himself smiling back.

...Wow.

That was... nice. That was really, really nice. He feels oddly giddy in the wake of it, weightless and teetering on the edge of laughter for no reason at all. It isn't funny. He laughs anyway. Hannibal laughs, too. *My nerves are turned on. I hear them like musical instruments. Where there was silence— the drums, the strings are incurably playing.*

Will bites his lip, his heart stopping when he notices the way Hannibal watches his mouth. Is he going to kiss him again? His hand is still on Hannibal's shoulder, and he makes his awkward way down the length of the other boy's arm, fingers trailing along firm muscles. Muscles Hannibal used to protect him, defend him, care for him. *You did this. Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped into fire.*

When he reaches Hannibal's hand, he ghosts over his bandaged knuckles. He swallows, looking down at the evidence of Hannibal's aggression. All those rumors about Hannibal's

family, about Hannibal killing the person who took them from him— he still didn't believe them.

Did he?

Hannibal broke Mason Verger's nose, and all he'd done was give Will a black eye. He didn't seem like he was going to stop, either, until Margot intervened. Would he have done worse, left to his own devices? Would Will have let him?

No. He decides that Hannibal wouldn't have hurt Mason any worse than that. Still, it makes him want to picture Hannibal defending him from other dangers-

He freezes.

'I have to go.'

Hannibal's fond expression falls in an instant. *'I see.'*

Will accidentally bumps noses with Hannibal this time, and their lips meet a bit awkwardly, but it speaks for itself. Hopefully.

'It's not like that,' he signs, in case it wasn't clear. *'I just need to go to the docks. My dad's already gonna be mad enough that I got into a fight, I don't need to add being late to the list.'*

Hannibal shoots him a relieved grin. God, he's so cute. Will's already praying that he doesn't manage to fuck up...whatever this just became. What is this, exactly? Something new, for sure. Something good.

Hannibal takes his hand as Will hops down off the counter, making sure that he's steady on his feet. *'I could drive you, if you'd like.'*

Will grimaces. *'He doesn't really know about you. And to be honest, I'd like to keep it that way. But I swear, it's more about him than you.'*

'I'll drop you off a short walk from the dock, then. Your father won't see me, you'll arrive quicker without having to run.'

He's about to refuse again, but the look in Hannibal's eye has him softening. *'Well...I guess that could be okay. Thanks.'*

Hannibal nods, pleased. *'Happy to.'*

-

Will is a swirl of feeling for the entire ride to the docks. He's not entirely sure what happened between them today, or what will happen between them in the future, but he feels cautiously optimistic. It's not a feeling he experiences often, and his stomach is twisting in ungainly shapes as it tries to reconcile with it.

Hannibal parks, and Will leaves more quickly than he likely should have. Chalk it up to an unwillingness to push his luck. Still, he barely remembers to say goodbye, which is rude in hindsight.

He turns when he hears a quick whistle behind him.

Hannibal is holding up his backpack, forgotten in the passenger floorboard. He meets Will in the middle, and Will takes the bag with a soft smile.

'Oh, thanks. Sorry about that. I'll...talk to you tomorrow, yeah?'

Hannibal nods. *'Have a pleasant evening, Will.'*

For a moment, both of them train their attention on the other's mouth. Will licks his lips. His heart dances over a few beats. He leans in-

A passing car makes Will jump, nervously stepping backwards. He might not be well-known in this town, but the last thing he needs is someone seeing him kissing another boy. Even if he wants to.

Even if he really, really wants to.

Hannibal just smiles reassuringly, raises his fingers to his forehead in a salute, and climbs back into his car. Will watches him drive away, lips tingling and heart pounding. He laughs. At his own awkwardness, at the warm happiness threatening to burst from his chest. At nothing at all.

Take The Fall

Chapter Notes

a little bit of a break after how eventful chapter 12 was!

enjoy this lull while it lasts— if lonely eyes was a teen sitcom, chapters 14 and 15 are like two parter Event Episodes that get advertised during every commercial break

'Two weeks?!'

Bev nods. "That's what I heard, anyway. Freddie Lounds is a Secretary assistant during first period, and Jimmy heard from Bella that Freddie saw Hannibal, his uncle, the Vergers, and their parents all go into the office first thing this morning. They didn't come out for nearly an hour."

'Shit.'

"He should be counting himself lucky," she says. "Apparently since it was technically outside of school hours, the Vergers wanted to go to the cops about it. They wanted to charge him for *assault*— can you believe that?"

He shakes his head, then freezes. *'Wait. Two weeks as in- like, this week and-'*

Bev gives him a grave look, confirming his fear. "He's staying home this week, but they're making him come in for in-school suspension over Spring Break."

Will sighs. He feels a surge of guilt pass over him.

"How's your face?"

He touches the bruise. It's tender. All he can think about is the way Hannibal traced the edge, the way his heart skittered to a stop. *'I've had worse."*

"...It was Mason, right?"

Will looks around the room. The last thing he wants is to spread gossip. When he sees that no one is paying attention, he nods. Bev blows out a long breath.

"I knew something wasn't adding up! Lecter's taking the fall for you, Will."

His brows furrow. *'What do you mean?'*

Bev gestures as if it's self-explanatory. "They called everyone who was there! Margot and Alana were in and out all first period. Did you get called to the office?"

Will shakes his head.

"That's what I mean, man! Look— the story that's going around right now is that Lecter cornered Mason after school, picked a fight with him because Mason's an asshole, and beat the ever-loving shit out of him. Unprovoked. That's why Mason's getting off scot-free while Lecter's spending Spring Break in ISS!"

...What? *'Why would he do that?'*

She shrugs. "I get why Mason and Margot would want to lie— It makes Mason look like he's nothing but a victim. But Lecter, I don't know. You'll have to ask him yourself, I guess."

Will sighs. Taking the fall for him, after everything he'd done already...

"So what really happened?"

He shrugs. **'Mason tried to fuck with me. Again. Pushed me around, punched me a couple times. Next thing I knew, Hannibal was caving his face in. Then Margot and Alana showed up and made him stop.'**

She leaned close over her desk, eyes wide. "What happened next?"

He chews his lip awkwardly, fiddling with the cuff of his flannel.

"Like after that," she prods again. "You guys just went home?"

'Pretty much, yeah. I mean, I was running late for work, so.'

Bev looks disappointed in him. "So Lecter shows up, and even after you guys got into that *huge* fight the other day, he saves your ass. And you just...went home? You didn't even *thank* him?"

Not entirely, he thinks. *You're skipping the part where we kissed in his kitchen. 'Yeah, I guess so.'*

She punches his shoulder. "God, you can be a shitty friend sometimes. And before you even say it-"

'Hannibal is my friend,' He confirms. *'I know.'*

A part of him almost wants to tell her the truth. The whole truth. That he's had a crush on Hannibal for a while now, and that they kissed after the fight, and that Will isn't entirely sure where they stand: if Hannibal really feels what Will feels or if it would be worth the risk or if Hannibal even *wants* a boyfriend, let alone to be *Will's* boyfriend—

Their teacher walks in, and she directs her attention back to her notebook. "Well, at least you're done pretending."

Will nods, scowling down at his desk.

He gets the sense that he won't be done pretending for a while.

-

Their lunch table is empty. He'd been expecting that. After all, Hannibal is at home right now, probably getting chewed out by his uncle for starting fights. His stomach growls. He's gotten way too accustomed to Hannibal bringing him lunch every day, his body expects it now. If he's honest with himself, he'd let himself get too accustomed to a lot of things lately.

Will reaches into his backpack, pulls out a book, stares down at the page. It feels strange. He hardly reads at lunch anymore. Too busy talking to Hannibal.

He finds himself wondering if Hannibal is looking at the clock, right now. Thinking that if he were at school right now, he'd be here, at their table, with Will.

Or maybe he's thinking about that kiss. *Will* is certainly thinking about it. Maybe too much. He can't seem to focus on anything today. He tries, and then his mind drifts of its own accord.

Hannibal. Hannibal punching Mason Verger in the face. Hannibal pressing ice to Will's eye. Hannibal giving Will his first kiss, unexpected and a little awkward but something he felt sure he would carry with him for the rest of his life—

"Hey."

Will looks up from the still open book, blinking away his distraction. Margot Verger flashes him a nervous smile.

"Can I sit here?" She asks, gesturing to the empty seat across from him. Will nods, narrowing his eyes in slight suspicion as she sits.

Margot sighs, looking down at her hands. "I'm sorry."

He grabs the small notebook from his bag, but she's already elaborating. "I told him to leave you alone, you know. Mason. He never actually listens to me, but I did try. I even told him that you and Alana were friends, since he usually tries to stay on her good side."

Will huffs. **'That might have been counter-productive.** He writes. **'But thanks.'**

"I'm...I'm glad that Lecter was there."

Will lifts a brow. She laughs softly. "He deserved to get his ass kicked. And it didn't really look like you were too interested in fighting back."

'According to everyone else, I wasn't even there.'

Margot shrugs, looking up at him. "We never really get the whole truth when things like this happen."

'Why did you cover Mason's ass?'

She reads the writing a few times, her frown growing every second. "Will, *Lecter* is the one who asked me to keep your name out of it."

Will gives her a look of confusion. Margot leans closer, speaking softly.

"He told both of us to lie to the principal. Alana, too. Just say the four of us were the only ones in the parking lot."

'Did he say why?'

She shrugs. "He told me that he didn't want your dad to get called down to the school, even if you didn't do anything. I tried to talk him out of it, so his punishment wouldn't be as harsh, but he said he knew what he was doing, so...I lied. Told everyone that when me and Alana went out to my car, Lecter was beating Mason up for no reason. Alana and Mason said the same thing."

The air leaves his lungs. His dad. Hannibal got suspended and lost his Spring Break, just because he didn't want Will to get in trouble with his dad.

He should say something. He should go to the principal and spill his guts. Tell him that he was there, that Mason started it, that Hannibal might have gone too far but that Mason should be punished, too.

...They probably *would* call his dad about it, though. He'd gotten off easy when he got to the docks yesterday. His dad had just reminded him to keep his head down, and to keep out of trouble, and that was about it. If the principal called him, though. If he found out that Hannibal had gotten involved...

"Will? You okay, man? You kind of look like you're gonna throw up."

He pushes his hair out of his face, nodding unconvincingly. **'I just feel like shit that he took the fall, I guess.'**

"I get that. But at the same time, it's not like you asked him to do it. And I'm willing to bet that Mason won't be bothering you anymore. Not after that."

That was definitely a plus. He had a few bullies, but Mason Verger was definitely the worst. Without him bothering Will, he might actual feel like he fits in, for once.

Fitting in. Was he really doing that? Only a handful of bullies, friends that like hanging out with him, a boy he liked- one who was willing to stand up for him...

Please, *please* let him ride out the rest of the semester here.

"Listen."

Will brought his attention back to the girl across from him. "You don't have to, or anything, but... if you wanted to come sit with me and my friends at lunch until Lecter gets back, I

promise they aren't as scary as they look."

He glances over at the table. Six seats. Two empty ones, where Margot and Mason usually are. Alana Bloom. Freddie Lounds. Bella and her boyfriend. All of them were involved in school athletics, in some form or fashion— Mason and Bella's boyfriend on the Track and Football teams, respectively. Freddie and Margot in the marching band. Alana and Bella, cheerleaders.

High schools are all surprisingly similar, at the end of the day. Will would know, he's attended nearly a dozen. And one thing that remains constant: if you're involved in sports, that promotes you to at least semi-popularity. Doubly so if your family has money, and even more if you're attractive.

Wait.

Does that mean he's been invited to-

-

"The *cool* table?!"

Will shrugs. **'I guess? They don't call it that.'**

"Of course not!" Brian replies, nearly knocking over his soda as he speaks. "It wouldn't be cool to *say* It's cool."

Jimmy chuckles. "Never would've guessed you'd get so cozy with Alana, Will."

"You should ask her out again," Bev says, popping a cheese-smothered tater tot into her mouth.

Will frowns. *'Again?'* he signs. *'What do you mean, "again"?'*

"You went on a date with her the other day, right? Took her to the movies?"

"Now you're sitting at her lunch table, with Crawford and Verger." Jimmy lifts his brows. "I don't know, that sounds like 'dating the most popular girl in school' to me."

He huffs. **'That wasn't a date. Margot and Han went too. And MARGOT is the one who asked me to sit there.'**

Bev gasps. "Wait, I just figured it out!"

All three boys frown at Beverly. She grins. "Will shouldn't ask Alana out."

Will sighs in relief. Yes, at least someone else is eager to drop this nonsense.

"He should ask *Margot."*

His eyes go wide. *'Are you nuts?'*

"Think about it, Will. She brought you that book you lost, she took you to the movies, she covered for you with that whole... Lecter-Mason thing. And now she's asking you to sit at her lunch table?" She gave him a lot that implied she'd made her case. "She likes you, dude."

"Oh my god, Will, you have to go for it," Brain insists. "She's rich, she's cool, and she's a *senior."*

'I'm not interested in dating every girl who's nice to me, alright?'

Brian falters. "Well, sure. I didn't mean, you know-" He trails off when Will starts writing again.

'Bev is nice to me. Bev is cool, she has a car, she's beautiful. You want me to date her, too?'

Brian's ears go pink in record time. "N-no! No, I'm not saying that at all!"

Bev glances at the other boys, then at Will. *'You think I'm beautiful?'* she signs.

He nods. *'Well, not like THAT, but yeah. I don't have to have a crush on you to notice that you're pretty, right?'*

"What are you guys saying?" Brain asks. The flush has spread to his cheeks now.

'I didn't just make things weird, did I?'

Bev smiles. *'No way.'*

'Good. You're getting really good at ASL, by the way.'

She laughs. "I'm good at faking, that's all," she says, aloud this time.

"F-faking what?" Brain demands. "What are you faking?!"

"Nothing," she says quickly, sending a not-so-subtle wink in Will's direction, much to Brian's dismay.

Will chuckles. *'Now who's the shitty friend?'*

"So what's it like?" Jimmy prods. "Being on the edge of popularity?"

This question redirects Brian's attention. "I've always imagined it like...like the sun on my face," he quips, sighing in false bliss.

Bev snorts. "Really? I've always pictured it feeling like you peaked before you turned twenty-five."

"You're not going to start ditching us for them, are you? Because we were your friends first, and Brian's mother never taught him to share."

Will shakes his head, smiling. **'It's fine.'**

-

It's *boring.*

Margot is cool, and he keeps sitting there because he appreciates her kindness, but oh God it's boring. All of the 'he-said-she-said' that he hears from Bev and the guys but with none of the personality to make it palatable.

Well, that wasn't exactly fair. Freddie Louds, for example, certainly *has* a personality. It's just an insufferable one. By the time Friday rolls around, he's counting down the minutes until Spring Break can finally begin. His week of school without Hannibal is nearly over. And then he just has to get through vacation, and he can see how royally he's fucked everything up between them.

He keeps replaying their worst-case scenario, torturing himself in his free time with a waking nightmare. One where Hannibal comes back and won't even look at him, where he awkwardly confesses that their kiss was a huge mistake and that they shouldn't be friends anymore. Where Will ruined everything with his feelings for the other boy, just like he always knew he would.

He has other daydreams too, though. Better ones. Really, really good ones. Daydreams where he and Hannibal sneak away from class together, maybe during their last period of the day. Maybe Han offers to drive Will to the dock so they have extra time together before he has to go. And they get into his car, and the parking lot is empty because all of the students are still in class, and Hannibal turns on the radio. Hannibal leans in across the car, and he kisses Will. Not like their kiss after the fight, not shy and unsure. Confident. Heated. Passionate. And Will tangles a hand into Hannibal's hair, and Hannibal moans into Will's mouth, and before he knows it they're in the backseat together and Will is on his back and—

"Will? Hey! Will!"

He jumps, his face burning. The other kids are all leaving the cafeteria. The bell must have rung without him noticing.

Margot smirks at him. "Listen up, Space Cadet: I want to ask you something."

Will nods, shoving his unread book into his bag and following her as she leaves the cafeteria.

"I'm throwing a party, you know. Tomorrow night."

He nods along. They've been talking about it at lunch all week.

"You wanna come?"

He trips over his own feet. Points to himself with a look of disbelief. She laughs.

"Yeah, you. My parents are taking Mason to some fancy Doctor in Shreveport to get a nose job, so I'll have the place to myself until Monday."

Will moves to shrug off his bag, and Margot holds out her own notebook with a red-lipped smile.

'Who's gonna be there?'

"Everybody, obviously. It's Spring Break, my parents are gone, we've got a pool..." she elbows him playfully. "You'll be there, right? It starts at seven and goes on until we all pass out. You can crash there and everything."

Will can hardly think of anything his Father would be more against. He would *never* say yes. Still...

'It'll be going all night?'

"And probably some of the morning, yeah."

His dad would kill him if he got caught. He would definitely, absolutely kill him.

If he got caught.

When he got caught— be realistic, Will. But then again, he'd never been to a party before, and everyone who's anyone is going...

'Can I invite a couple people?'

Margot grimaces. "Like I said, I think Mason deserved to get his ass kicked, but-"

He shakes his head. **'No, not Hannibal. Beverly Katz, Brian Zeller, and Jimmy Price?'**

She looks at the list, nodding slowly to herself. "You know what? Sure. I've got sixth period with Zeller. I'll give him the info and he can pass it along to Katz and Price. Oh— here, let me..."

Margot scribbles down an address and rips the paper out of her notebook, holding it out to him. She smiles warmly.

"At least try to stop by, yeah?"

The paper crinkles when Will takes it, folding it up and putting it in the pocket of his jeans. He smiles back, and nods.

Big Fun

Chapter Notes

> aaaaaa this chapter came out WAY longer than I intended but I had a lot of scenes to cover. Chapter 15 will pick up RIGHT where this chapter left off, like a 2 parter episode! I hope you enjoy, I loved writing this part!

It's 9:15 pm.

Will sits on the couch, leg bouncing anxiously. His socked feet are silent on the floor, his heart hammering with anxiety. It's not too late to just go to sleep. To pull out the mattress, and curl up under a blanket, and just forget about the whole thing. He'd been *planning* on doing that, honestly. It was nice of Margot to invite him, but he wasn't going to risk rocking the boat by asking his dad if he could go to a party. So that was that. He wasn't going to go.

Until his dad passed out at about 8:30. He never fell asleep that early, but it was a Saturday, and judging by the number of glass bottles in their bag for the recycling plant, his old man had been going for some sort of personal record. And he still hadn't wanted to risk it, in case his father awoke.

But he's been asleep for nearly an hour, without so much as twitching. He's snoring loud enough to wake the dead. Will eyes the keys to the truck, resting innocently on the kitchen counter. Chews his lip. He looks at himself in the black reflection of the television. He's wearing his least worn pair of jeans, a black T-shirt— one that actually *fits* for once— and a black and blue flannel. He looks good. He looks...fine. ...Does he look okay?

Will recalls the day he'd fixed Hannibal's car. The way Hannibal had looked at him, how warm and nervous but flattered it made him feel. Before he can overthink it he pads over to his backpack, pulling the simple black hair tie Bev had lent him from the front pocket, along with the small notebook he uses for communication.

He ties his hair into a small, low ponytail. Glances toward the bedroom. Listens to his dad snore. He ties the sleeves of his flannel around his hips. The keys are on the counter. His sneakers are by the door. His dad is snoring. It's 9:20 pm. Will swallows, hard. Margot Verger's address is in his pocket. The keys are in his hand. His shoes are in his other hand. He holds his breath as the door closes with a soft click. He counts to ten. Nothing happens. He puts his shoes on outside, now that he doesn't have to worry about the volume of his footsteps. His heart is pounding. He doesn't turn the headlights on until he's turning out of the parking lot. It's 9:25 pm.

Will Graham has just snuck out for the first time.

-

What. Is. He. Doing.

What the fuck is he doing? He should turn around, *now.*

Finding Margot's house is easier than he'd anticipated. The small nation of teenagers currently occupying it helps. Will parks the truck in the nearest available spot, which is fairly far from the house due to the cars spilling out of the driveway and out into the street. Christ, what is he doing? He almost knocks on the front door, then realizes that would be distinctly uncool in addition to pointless, and just walks in.

Will isn't entirely sure what he expected. Somehow he thought he'd be prepared. That feels like it was shortsighted, now.

The living room has been turned into a dance floor, the luxurious sofa along with all other furniture pushed to the far corner. The dancing bodies are like an ocean to him, rising and falling as a unit. The music is loud. It's too loud, actually. He feels his heart start pounding again. Maybe he should just go.

"Will?"

It's shouted over the music, and Will barely hears it but he sees Margot shouldering her way through the crowd. He salutes to her in greeting, she grins and salutes back. Once she's in front of him, dressed to impress in glittering silver eyeshadow and a tight red halter top, she speaks.

Or, she tries to speak. He furrows his brows to indicate that he hadn't heard her and she rolls her eyes. She mimes writing, and he hands her his notebook.

'I didn't think you were coming!' she writes, showing him the page with a wide, welcoming smile. The handwriting is wobbly, and she misspelled a couple of words. He observes her posture, the way she's swaying with the music.

'Are you drunk?'

She laughs and holds up her finger and thumb, the tips nearly touching. He reads her lips when she says 'just a little'. He somehow doubts that. Her face lights up, and she takes the book back.

'Do you want a drink?'

Will tries to disguise his growing discomfort. He shakes his head. **'I don't drink.'**

Just then, a commotion breaks out within the crowd. Ricky Chilton trying to grind on someone's girlfriend, by the sound of it. Margot gives him a look of amused shock, and nods in the direction of the kitchen. He gladly follows.

It's quieter in here. Margot sighs, moving for a cooler on the kitchen floor. "You sure you don't want anything? I've got beer, vodka, rum— I think Freddie's making Jungle Juice

downstairs"

He shakes his head adamantly, a wave of discomfort washing over him at the very suggestion.

Margot shrugs. "Suit yourself. Well, there's soda in the fridge and stuff, too."

Will nods in gratitude. She smirks. "You look cute tonight, you know."

He huffs, face growing hot, and waves her comment away.

"No, come on. I mean it." Her smile falls a fraction. "Alana's gonna freak when she sees you. Guaranteed."

He freezes up at that, caught in headlights. Before he can even begin to respond, though, Bella is leaning in the kitchen doorway.

"Margot, Matty Brown is throwing up in your bathtub," she says, sounding on the whole disinterested. "Just thought you should know."

She sighs. "Fucking sophomores can't hold their liquor— I should go make sure he doesn't choke. Enjoy the party, Will. Oh! Um, I think your buddies are all out by the pool, if you were looking for them."

He nods, watching her disappear up the steps. He tries to dislodge the nauseated feeling brewing in his gut, the one telling him that he doesn't belong here. He belongs. Margot asked him to be here. That's good enough, right?

Fuck, where's Bev?

-

The swimming pool is in the side yard, and with the aid of the softly glowing lights hanging outside, Will can make out about a dozen half-naked teens in the water. It may officially be spring, but he still can't fathom how they aren't freezing in there. It takes him a moment to spy three familiar figures, all talking and laughing, two of them with beers in hand.

Jimmy notices him first. He points in Will's direction, and Will can just make out the sound of his nasally voice saying "Oh shit, is that Will?" over the other conversations.

Bev and Brian both light up when they see him, and it makes him grin. Suddenly the trio is making their awkward way to the edge of the pool, Bev propping both her beer and her elbows on the stone siding. She smiles up at him. "You're here! I mean, Margot told Brian that you were coming, but none of us thought you were *actually* gonna show up!" Her smile falls. "Wait, how are you here? I thought your dad was like, a huge asshole."

Will tries to look guilty. He can't believe he's actually about to say this. *'I kind of...didn't ask. I just snuck out.'*

Bev's eyes go wide. She splashes his shoes. "Get out! I didn't know you had it in you!"

"What happened?" Brian asks, lifting his own beer to his lips. It doesn't escape Will how the boy grimaces at the taste. Has he ever drank before?

She gives him a grave look. "Will, did you...did you *steal* your dad's truck?"

Brian chokes. Will nods, a bit sheepishly.

"Holy shit," Bev says. "That's...so fucking sick."

And just like that, all three of them are laughing, and Will gets swept along with them. "Look at you," Jimmy says with a smirk. "Getting into fights, scoring invites to Verger parties, committing Auto Theft." He lifts his brows. "You're a badass, Will."

"Here, here," Bev mutters, clinking bottles with Brian before they both take swigs.

Will starts to deny it, but Brian speaks first. "You're a legend, dude. I can't believe you got us invited to Margot Verger's house! Do you know how cool that is? I thought I was gonna throw up when she invited me!"

"What's next?" Bev prods. "Are we sneaking into a bar? Trespassing in an abandoned building? Buying organs on the black market?"

Will snorts. *'Let's see if I survive the night and work from there,'* he signs, and Bev passes the message along to the boys.

"Alright," Brian says, "But I expect to be robbing a bank by Yom Kippur, is that clear?" He hoists himself out of the pool with a grunt. "I'm getting another beer, you want one Bev?"

"I'll come with you!" Brian leans down and takes her hand, helping her out of the water, and she stumbles to find her footing. She laughs when they bump into each other, crossing her arms when she steps back. Will notices the purple cotton of her boyshorts, then, and realizes for the first time that neither of them are in swimsuits.

'Did you...go swimming in your underwear?' he questions, and Bev laughs.

"Yeah! Well, you know. I wanted to swim, but I didn't have a bathing suit. And then Brian was like 'I'll take off my clothes and jump in the pool if *you* take off your clothes and jump in the pool', and then Jimmy wanted to do it too, so...Oh! You should get in the pool with us!"

He chuckles, shaking his head fondly at his friends. Idiots, all three of them. *'And how many drinks did you have before you decided to go swimming in your underwear?'*

She rolls her eyes, punching his shoulder. "None of your business, that's how many. Now come on, you already risked getting in huge trouble to be here. Loosen up and have some fun! It's Spring Break, remember?"

-

He tries to take her advice. Tries to loosen up, to relax. He doesn't strip and jump in the pool in his boxers, but he does take off his shoes and roll up the cuffs of his jeans so he can lounge

by the pool with his feet in the water. It's fun, the way goofing off with Bev and the guys is always pretty fun. The novelty of being out at night wears off pretty quickly, though, and he finds himself feeling tired, and a little underwhelmed.

"Oh! There you are!"

Will turns to find Alana Bloom standing on the patio, her hair done up in curls and strappy white heels on her feet. She smiles, fiddling with the ends of her hair. "Hi, Will."

He nods to her in greeting, smiling politely.

"Bella told me you were here, so I've been looking for you." She takes a step closer. "How, um...How are you feeling?" She asks, gesturing to her own face.

He shrugs. He's always been a quick healer, his black eye had only lasted a couple of days.

"He's fine," Bev deadpans from her spot floating near his knees.

Alana shakes her head. "It was terrible. What happened with Lecter, and everything."

Will just nods.

"We're about to play a game, upstairs. M-Margot told me to ask if you wanted to join in."

"I'll play!" Brian offers, and Bev takes a long swig from her drink.

"Actually, there's only enough room for one more player," Alana replies, casting Will an expectant, wide-eyed glance.

Will hesitates for a moment. "He's in," Jimmy says for him, urging Will toward the door with a pointed look.

"Great! Come with me, we're playing in Margot's room."

He shoots Jimmy a panicked expression, but retrieves his shoes and follows.

-

When they enter Margot's room on the second floor, Will almost turns on his heel and bolts. A generous handful of his peers are sitting on the floor in a circle. They immediately shuffle to make space for the new players, Will and Alana taking seats across from each other.

Maybe it's not what it looks like?

Margot grins at the group, producing an empty Bacardi Breezer bottle and setting it in the center of the circle. "Alright. House Rules, Campers: No teeth, no tongue, no doubles."

Will feels his fight or flight instincts kick in. He's leaning towards flight. He looks across the circle. Alana smiles at him. Oh god.

Will is *not* supposed to be here.

-

It's Margot.

It takes a while. Long enough that Will almost starts to hope that he'll get out of this game alive. Just sitting on Margot Verger's bedroom floor, watching different combinations of his classmates awkwardly kiss. And then it loops around to Margot, and she spins the bottle, and it stops on Will.

Margot laughs good-naturedly, and it actually sets Will at ease. "Oh, your buddy Zeller's gonna be so pissed at you," she teases, and he manages to laugh.

She leans close, whispering to him. "Relax, man. It's just for fun," she says, and then she's kissing him. *My mouth blooms, like-*

Huh.

It's good. It's...fine. It's definitely a kiss. Nothing like kissing Hannibal was, though. Part of him feels extraordinarily guilty at the thought of him, he realizes. Would Hannibal be upset that Will kissed Margot? Would he be jealous? They'd never technically *said* that neither of them could kiss other people, but when Will tries to imagine Hannibal in his own position—

And then Margot is pulling away, still grinning. She rubs Will's lower lip with a light laugh. "My lipstick looks good on you," she quips. "Go on, Will, your turn."

Will shakes himself. Margot is right. It's just for fun. Margot is his friend, but neither of them have any romantic feelings for each other. Hannibal wouldn't be jealous, it's only a game.

The bottle lands on Alana Bloom.

Ah, fuck. That's...that's not good.

Alana is blushing. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. Will can't say no, it would hurt her feelings. But he can't *kiss* her, either, can he? Alana *likes* him, he knows she likes him. It would be wrong to lead her on.

It's just for fun. Alana knows that, right? She leans close, her long lashes fall closed. Will swallows.

The kiss is quick. Just a peck. She looks disappointed when he pulls away in a fraction of a second. Her lip gloss is sticky on his mouth, and it tastes like fake strawberries.

And suddenly the air in the room goes cold.

Margot's wedges click on the floor as she leaves, half-running for the hall. Will doesn't hesitate. He stands and follows her.

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When he finds her, she's on a balcony outside what appears to be her parents' room. It overlooks the pool, and Will can see Jimmy with Freddie Lounds and a few other kids from the band still hanging out in the water. Bev and Brian are gone, up to God-knows-what.

Margot takes a centering breath when he joins her near the railing. She puts on a smile. "Hey, man, back for more? I hope I wasn't your first kiss, because you'll never have a better one."

'Are you okay?'

She shrugs, deflating in an instant. "I'm fine. I just didn't want to play anymore, that's all."

Will doesn't believe her, but he chooses not to press it. For a few minutes, the two of them are silent. Margot's hair catches the Spring breeze, sending a few errant locks into her face.

"...Do you like Alana, Will?"

Will shrugs. **'She seems nice, but I'm not interested in her.'**

She nods, breathing out a bitter laugh. "She likes you. When she heard I invited you tonight I thought she was gonna pass out."

'Thank you, by the way.'

"No worries. I like having you around."

She frowns down at her hands, fiddling with a large silver ring on her finger. "I'm really sorry about Mason, you know."

'It wasn't your fault.'

"I just know what it's like, that's all. Being pushed around by him and everything." When she looks Will in the face again, her eyes are wet and glassy. "He does it to me, too. And my parents always take his side. My family, they all think I'm... weird."

He offers her a small smile. **'That's okay. I'm weird, too.'**

"I know. That's *why* I like you, Will."

Will chuckles. **'Us freaks have to stick together, right?'**

Her answering smile is a bit sad. "I just wish I was more like you, I guess. You don't care what anybody thinks about you." She huffs. "I think if I did what I actually *wanted* to do, my parents would disown me on the spot."

He sighs. **'Believe me, I know how you feel.'**

Margot's mouth twists. She shifts awkwardly from foot to foot. "Alana looks really pretty tonight, don't you think? I mean, I know you said you don't like her, but you still have eyes, right?"

Will tilts his head. **'You look pretty too,'** he writes, because he isn't sure what else to say.

She smiles. "Thanks. We got ready together. Alana came over this afternoon, and we did our hair, and gave each other makeovers." Margot swallows. Her usually cooler-than-ice demeanor is slipping. She looks nervous. Unsure. "When she came close to do my eyeliner, I could *smell* her. She always uses that um, that Pear Perfume from Victoria's Secret. I bought a bottle of it for her birthday like, three years ago, and it's been her signature scent ever since. I don't even know if she remembers why she started wearing it in the first place, though."

Margot looks Will in the eye. She's never looked more fragile to him. "She's wearing my lip gloss tonight. Tastes good, right? Like strawberries."

Will's heart skips a beat. Oh. *Oh.* He and Margot had more in common than he ever gave her credit for. This is...new. This is very, very new.

"You're not gonna tell everyone I told you that, right?"

Will swallows. His hands are trembling as he writes. He can't believe he's doing this, but he wants Margot to know. He wants, so badly, to affirm that she isn't alone. That neither of them have ever been alone.

'You weren't my first kiss, Margot.'

She frowns at the words. "Okay..."

He braces himself, wincing at the page.

'Hannibal Lecter was.'

Margot blinks. She stares, first at the paper, and then at Will. "...Really?"

Will nods.

"Oh my god," she whispers, the gears in her mind nearly audible. Then all at once, she brightens with surprise. *"Oh my god!* You're- I mean, we- oh my god. You like boys?"

He nods again, her cautious delight at the confession oddly contagious.

She laughs in disbelief. "So, you and Lecter— Do you like him? Does he like you? What am I saying, of course he likes you, he nearly killed my brother for you. Holy shit, Will!"

And suddenly they're both laughing, and Will is grinning so wide it aches. Fuck, that felt so good to say. He's elated. Finally, finally, he has friends who can understand. Even if he's still pretending, even if no one else can know, Margot and Hannibal do. And it feels fucking fantastic.

He can't write fast enough, his handwriting is wobbly where his hands shake with nervous giddiness. **'I like him a lot, yeah. I don't really know if we're gonna kiss again, though. I want to. We haven't talked since it happened.'**

She gives him a confused look, her smile dropping just a fraction. "What do you mean, you haven't talked since? When did you kiss him?"

'Less than half an hour after he nearly killed your brother.'

Her jaw drops. She looks scandalized. "That was over a week ago, Will! What the fuck is wrong with you, why haven't you talked to him?"

The whiplash makes him dizzy. **'He's been suspended! And I have a job!'**

"So you'll steal a car to come to my stupid party, but you can't spare some time to sneak into Lecter's bedroom window while you're in the neighborhood?" She pushes his shoulder. "What are doing *here,* go get him before he changes his mind!"

'Really?'

She groans in frustration. "Oh my god, yes Will! You should've gone days ago! You'll be lucky if he doesn't slam the door in your face at this point! I'll tell your friends that you had to dip, just go."

'But what about you?'

Margot grabs him by both shoulders. "Will, your crush is two streets from here, serving a prison sentence *for you,* wondering if you want him as bad as he wants you. Let me live vicariously through you, and go kiss that boy!"

Will takes a breath, nods sharply. Margot reaches up, fussing with his hair. "Don't psych yourself out, okay? You look great. You're gonna knock him dead. Go."

-

Hannibal's house is quiet. Will sits in his dad's truck out front, heart hammering in his throat, and stares up at a second-floor window. The light is on. It's the only light that's on in the house. He bites his lip. It's 11:29 pm.

He steps out of the truck, closing the door gently behind him, and creeps through the plush lawn. He plucks a handful of smooth white pebbles from the small garden out front, takes a long, slow breath, and tosses one at the window. Waits. Tosses another. Nearly runs for his life. Tosses a third one for good measure.

When Hannibal parts the curtains and peers down into the yard, Will nearly chokes. He's in a simple grey T-shirt, his normally styled hair loose and soft-looking where it hangs in his face. Hannibal sees him, and his face breaks into that sharp, beautiful grin.

Will smiles back up at him, lifts a hand, and beckons him down to the yard.

Genius at Work

Chapter Notes

thank you guys SO MUCH for 10k hits on this fic!!!! you have no idea just HOW MUCH this means to me!

this is a VERY dialog heavy chapter, so I hope that suits your tastes <3

The seconds between Hannibal disappearing from the window and the knob of the front door slowly twisting feel like they last a lifetime. It's silent, save for the crickets. Will's heart is pounding. Shit, does he look okay? Yes. Margot said so. It's fine. Knock him dead, that's what she told him. He'll knock Hannibal dead.

So why is Will the one who forgets how to breathe when Hannibal is standing in the doorway?

He swallows. By the time he thinks to bring his fingers to his forehead, Hannibal is already signing.

'Will, what on Earth are you doing here? It's nearly midnight.'

He tries to act casual. He suspects the attempt to be a massive failure. *'I was in the neighborhood, and I...wanted to see you,'* he signs, praying that Hannibal doesn't shut the door. *'Is that okay?'*

Hannibal eases his mind with a single upward quirk of his lips. *'I wanted to see you, too,'* he replies.

Will grins. His mind immediately pivots from anxious to eager. *'Do you want to hang out in the truck? We can listen to music and talk and...stuff.'*

The other boy's eyes flick toward the road at that, and his face turns serious. *'Is that your father's truck?'*

'Not tonight,' he answers, pulling the keys from his pocket and jingling them in triumph.

Hannibal shakes his head. *'You're getting reckless, you know,'* he signs, but he softly shuts the front door behind himself and begins to pad across the lawn.

'Must be a bad influence. Maybe I should get new friends.'

He laughs. Will feels indestructible. *'Don't you dare blame me for this. If I'd known you were even thinking of doing something this stupid, I would have begged you to find some common*

sense.'

'And yet, you're enabling me,' Will observes. He ducks into the truck, turns the radio on at a low volume, and rolls the window down. When he shuts the door to make his way to the bed of the truck, Hannibal is regarding him with a heart-twisting fondness.

'You've already chosen to sneak out. It's a bit too late to stop you.'

Will licks his lips. *'I might not be caught yet. You could always tell me to leave.'*

Would you listen?'

'If you actually wanted me to.'

Hannibal regards the truck, his dark house, Will. *'I suppose a few minutes wouldn't hurt.'*

His face splits into a wide grin. He pulls the tailgate down, hoisting himself into the bed of the truck with a grunt. When he turns, he holds out a hand. Hannibal smiles, his sharp features softened by moonlight. His hand is warm in Will's own, and when Hannibal steps up they're a matter of inches from each other. Hannibal is tall— Will's always been small for his age but he finds that he doesn't mind it too much when the other boy is looking down at him like this. He watches Hannibal's lower lip catch behind sharp incisors and feels himself blushing.

'Thank you,' Hannibal signs.

Will takes an awkward half-step back, taking a seat on the toolbox near the cab of the truck. *'Don't mention it.'*

Hannibal sits next to him. Will becomes acutely aware of how dirty the truck is, how the bed is full of empty cans and bottles. If Hannibal cares he's too polite to say so. He glances back at Hannibal's house. Big, clean, quiet. They don't fit together, he realizes. His beat-up old pickup wouldn't look right in Hannibal's driveway.

'How much trouble are you in?'

The other boy blows out a long breath, displacing the fringe from his face. *'Uncle was furious,'* he replies. *'With me, at first. Then with the school, then with the Vergers. More than anything I believe he's just concerned. I haven't had many disciplinary issues since moving here.'*

'...Thanks, by the way. For keeping my name out of everything. I know that bit you in the ass.'

'Of course. I only intervened to protect you in the first place, I couldn't stop there.' He looks to Will, his eyes betraying a note of sadness. Sympathy. *'There are worse things in the world than Mason Verger, after all.'*

Will breaks the contact, eyes flicking down to study the toes of his sneakers. After a slightly tense minute, he signs *'It's been weird, not having you around.'* It isn't quite what he wants to say, but it's close.

'There isn't anyone bothering you, is there? I'd hoped what happened to Mason would be a one-time occurrence. '

He blushes. He'd been wondering, privately, what might happen if another bully arose to take Mason's place. He has an answer now.

Hannibal would do it again, then, if the student body didn't get the message. Don't fuck with Will Graham, or Hannibal Lecter will put you in the hospital.

...Why does Will like the sound of that so much?

'I'm fine. But...thanks.' He laughs to himself. *'I think you actually made me kind of popular?'*

'Is that so?'

Will nods. *'I've even been sitting at Margot's lunch table. I don't even know how that happened.'*

He feels the air shift when Hannibal sighs softly. *'I'm happy for you.'*

In what was all-too-quickly becoming a pattern, Will didn't realize the implications of his statement until it'd already been said. *'Just until you get back, though. And then I'll come back to our table.'*

Hannibal looks deeply disappointed. *'You don't have to. Really.'*

I miss you. That's what Will wants to say. In fact it's the only thing he really wants to say. I miss you, I like you, I want *you.*

Instead he settles for *'They're not that interesting, anyway.'*

Hannibal gives him a hesitant smile. *'You once told me that you didn't find me interesting, either.'*

Will smiles back. *'I guess you changed my mind.'*

It occurs to Will, then, how close the two of them are actually sitting. There's barely an inch between their hips, Will's knees nearly knocking into Hannibal's. He can feel the warmth of Hannibal's arm, ghosting over the side of his own. It would be simple to close that space. To take his hand, to press lips to his cheek, to rest his head on his shoulder. His skin tingles with it, aching, aching.

'I mean, I like my friends and all, but...I'd always pick you, Han. You know that, don't you?'

Hannibal turns away for just a moment, and when he looks back he's trying *very* hard to maintain a neutral expression. He's failing, but he's trying. It's his eyes that give him away. It's always those eyes. *'I do now.'*

Will sighs lazily. The air feels so open, free and forbidden. *'I went to a party tonight,'* he signs. *'At Margot Verger's house.'*

'Did you? How was it?'

He sucks in a breath. He almost tells Hannibal the full story. How everyone was drunk, and how he got roped into a painfully awkward game of Spin the Bottle, and ended up kissing Margot, of all people. Something gives him pause, though. Honestly, he feels embarrassed. Embarrassed that he risked so much for something so stupid, embarrassed that the presence of so much alcohol made him feel sick and anxious. Embarrassed that he'd kissed Margot and Alana, just because he isn't as good at ignoring peer pressure as he'd like to be.

'It was really...weird, actually. I don't know if I'm cut out for popularity.' He tucks a loose curl behind his ear anxiously. *'I'm glad I came here, instead.'*

'So am I,' Hannibal replies. *'I've missed you, Will.'*

Will's heart nearly breaks his sternum with how forcefully it starts to pound. People don't *miss* Will— hell, he's lucky if they notice he's there to begin with. But Hannibal—

Hannibal missed him. Hannibal wanted him near, and thought of him when he wasn't around, and wasn't even ashamed to say so.

'Hannibal?'

'Yes?'

His pulse is racing. He balls his hands into fists, releases them. It doesn't help.

'...Can I kiss you?'

Hannibal stares back at him, eyes lidded where they train on Will's mouth. His nod is small, nervous. Will licks his lips.

A part of Will was worried that it wouldn't be the same as it was last week. That their first kiss was special due only to it being the first. When his lips press to Hannibal's, that worry gets caught by the breeze as easily as a dandelion seed. Will tilts his head, Hannibal's mouth warm and soft against his own, and it feels monumental. It's too many things to not be important. It's drowning, and it's coming up for air. It's forgetting how to think. It's every single nerve feeling unbearably present. His body is a machine— gears spinning, currents flowing, his heart an engine finally turning over. He cups Hannibal's face in both hands, holding him as close as he can, kissing him again, again, again. Hannibal lifts a hand to cover Will's own, and Will frowns into the kiss. Gently, he pulls away.

'Are you okay?'

Hannibal doesn't seem to register what he means right away. There's a dazed, spellbound look in his eyes.

'You're shaking, Hannibal,' he explains.

Hannibal simply swallows, looking down at his own trembling hands with frightened fascination.

'Did I- was that too much? I'm sorry, I just...really like kissing you—'

He's gentle when he takes Will's hand, pulling it close until his palm is pressed to Hannibal's heart. Will blushes when he feels it racing. It's shockingly intimate, so much so that Will nearly needs to pull away.

'You did this,' Hannibal signs, and Will smiles tenderly.

'Pure genius at work,' Will replies.

Hannibal's expression turns to one of shock. *'What was that?'*

'It's from the poem you gave me. "You did this. Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped into fire." Right?'

The other boy looks confused, now. Will feels himself starting to panic. *'I gave you a poem?'* Hannibal asks. *'When?'*

'I didn't know if it was on purpose,' he signs. *'But part of that poem was on the back of the drawing you gave me. I liked it so much, I went looking for it. I've read it at least a hundred times, and a lot of other poems, too.'*

'You read poetry because of me?' Will nods. Hannibal is quickly shifting from confused back to delighted. *'Why didn't you tell me? Or just ask me about the couplet?'*

Will shrugs. He feels his face burning. *'I guess I was scared that if I told you, you would realize how much I like you.'*

Hannibal laughs warmly. *'Are you afraid now?'*

He nods. *'Yes. Very. But I still want you to know. So...I really like you.'*

Will smiles into the kiss when Hannibal captures his lips, this time. *'I really like you, too, Will,'* he signs when they part.

The breeze is heavy when it rolls by. It may be late but it's barely chilly, even this early in the year. That doesn't stop Will from sheepishly signing *'I feel bad that I dragged you out here in your pajamas. Here, do you want this?'* And holding out his flannel.

Will has never been so glad that so many of his shirts are too big for him before. Hannibal takes it without hesitation, and pulls it on. Will immediately decides that he is *never* going to ask the other boy to give it back.

'Thank you.'

He starts to wave the thanks away, to say that it's nothing, but suddenly Hannibal is kissing him again. He loses track of the seconds, this time— or are they minutes? At some point Hannibal is bold enough to run the tip of his tongue along the seam of Will's lips, and the next thing he knows he's breathless and hot all over. His fingers are tangled in Hannibal's

hair, Hannibal's hands are skimming up and down Will's back, their kisses are clumsy and wet and inelegant and Will is *lost.*

He's gasping for air when they finally part, flushed and exhilarated and more aware than *ever* of why so many boys his age are so impatient to have sex. He tries to breathe. Hannibal's lips are swollen, his pupils are blown. Will shakes his head, trying to dislodge the thick fog blocking his senses.

'Do you want to go out tomorrow?' Will asks abruptly.

'As a date, you mean?'

He nods, still trying to regulate his breathing. *'Yes. As a date. Go on a date with me, tomorrow.'*

Hannibal grins. Will already knows what his answer will be. *'What would we do?'*

Will chews his lip. *'I usually go fishing on Sundays, but we can do whatever you want. Honestly, I just want to spend the day with you.'*

'That sounds nice.'

He frowns. *'You're sure? You don't really seem like the type to enjoy fishing.'*

'I can't say that I am, no. But I could bring my sketchbook and draw the scenery. I could even pack a meal for us, if you'd like. Have a picnic by the river.'

Will's heart flutters wildly at the picture Hannibal paints. *'Yes. That sounds perfect.'*

Hannibal looks like he can't think of anything lovelier. Will feels warmth seep straight down to his bone marrow. *'Then it's a date,'* Hannibal signs. *'Providing that you aren't grounded the moment you step through your front door tonight, that is.'*

His stomach drops. Oh, fuck. Right.

'I should probably go now, shouldn't I?'

Hannibal laughs. *'I'm afraid so. But I'm happy that you came to see me.'*

Before Hannibal can leave, Will darts close again. The kiss is quick this time, far too quick for his liking. *'I'll meet you at the library tomorrow morning, yeah? If I'm not there by noon I'm atoning for my sins.'*

That earns him another soft chuckle. *'Then I hope, for both our sakes, to see you there.'*

One last lingering kiss, and then Hannibal is sneaking back into his house. Will sighs, watching until Hannibal shuts the door behind him before he finally drives away.

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Will holds his breath. Turns the knob. Counts to ten. Eases the door open- slowly, slowly.

The room is still exactly as he left it. Dark and silent. He lets out a long, slow breath. Gingerly, he sets down his shoes by the door. Slips his notebook back inside of his backpack. Prepares to crawl into bed—

"What're you doing up?"

Will freezes. His heart stops. He spins on his heel to see his father, standing half-asleep and groggy in the bedroom threshold.

'Couldn't sleep,' he answers, praying that he doesn't look as frightened as he feels.

His dad grunts. "You're gonna be a zombie tomorrow."

Will just nods.

He narrows his eyes. "You okay, Willy? You look like you're about to shit yourself."

Oh god. Oh god. *'I'm just not feeling well, I guess.'*

He steps closer, towering over him. Will instinctively makes himself small, hunching his shoulders. "You didn't have another one of your nightmares, did you?"

Will forces a sheepish smile. *'You caught me.'*

Will's dad just huffs, making his way for the fridge. "Swear to God, if I start waking up to you screaming bloody murder again I'm gonna send you to bed with duct tape over your mouth."

He tries to laugh. It's just a joke. Or at least, it always has been so far.

"Go back to bed, Willy. You're too old to be getting scared over a dream."

Will nods sharply, ready to do exactly as he's been told.

"Hey."

He tries to keep from breathing. Looks back at his dad.

"Take your hair down, son. I told you not to do that, you look like a fairy."

With any luck, he interprets Will's sigh of relief as a huff of irritation. He pulls the hair tie out, shaking his head to loosen his hair. After a minute or two, his dad stalks back to the bedroom. Will stares up at the ceiling. Waits. Counts to ten before he lets himself smile.

Unbelievable. He actually got away with it.

He doesn't celebrate for long, though. He rolls over, shuts his eyes, and tries to fall asleep.

After all, he's got a date tomorrow.

Like This

Chapter Notes

> sorry for the wait on this one! This chapter kind of got away from me— I ended up cutting a lot of scenes to use for later and yet it's SO much longer than the average chapter lol oh well!

Will isn't blind to the fact that his life is not normal.

Not even just that *he* isn't normal— that point has been drilled so deep into his skull that it's in danger of clogging his sinuses— but that his circumstances are simply not those of the average sixteen year-old boy.

For a long time, longer than he'd like to admit, he hadn't realized this fact. It had come as quite the surprise to him, finding out that the close-knit, generous families he saw on television were based in reality rather than being a complete fabrication. Then again, maybe that shouldn't be so surprising. Frankenstein's Monster wouldn't *be* monstrous if Victor Frankenstein were a typical father. He would just be...average.

Will tries not to think about how his life could be, if things were different. It only ever makes him feel bitter. But on the rare occasions that he can't stop himself, that he pictures a world where everyone *is* ten feet tall, with sallow skin and wide golden eyes—

Well, he imagines it feels like this.

Hannibal's hands flex on the steering wheel, the streets slowly becoming less well-maintained until a sudden breaking point when the road becomes gravel crunching beneath his tires. Will cringes, praying that Hannibal will forgive him for the havoc this road is wreaking on his suspension.

They pull over near the tiny dirt path that leads down to the river, and when Will opens the passenger door he smells dirt, and fresh forest air, and the blossoms of a Honeysuckle bush nearby. Will watches the other boy open the back seat and pull out a small cooler, and he smiles.

Hannibal looks good. He always looks good, but Will is more affected by it than usual. Affected because he knows that Hannibal only got ready for Will's eyes, today. He finds himself admiring Hannibal's arms as he hefts the cooler out of the car, the other boy having opted for a short sleeved button-down today. Pale blue. It suits him. Will hasn't really convinced himself that this is *happening,* just yet. He's actually here, with Hannibal. On a date with another boy.

Hannibal tilts his head when he looks back at Will, looking cautiously amused. Will realizes then that he's grinning like an idiot. With flushed cheeks, he clears his throat and turns his attention on the fishing rod and tackle box in the backseat.

When they find a good spot, under the shade of a sprawling sweetgum tree a handful of yards from the water, Hannibal unfurls a thin quilt and pins down one corner with the cooler. He watches Will prepare his line with great interest, and Will tries hard not to fumble as he ties a knot for his lure.

'Something the matter?' Will prods.

'What are you trying to catch today?'

Will smiles to himself. *'Bass,'* he replies. *'I've seen catfish in this river, too, but they don't like artificial bait.'*

Hannibal scoots closer, sitting cross-legged on the blanket. *'What do they like?'*

'Catfish have sensitive noses. If it stinks, it works, usually. The best thing to use is chicken livers, but I try not to spend too much money on fishing stuff if I can help it. Especially since my rod...' he falters. *'Well, it...broke, a few months ago, and my dad got me this one for Christmas as a replacement but he told me that he wouldn't buy me any bait or hooks, since I don't go fishing with him anymore.'*

'You used to fish with your father?'

Will nods, a bit awkwardly. *'It was the only thing we really did together. Well, that and watch movies. We still do that, though. Sometimes.'*

The intensity with which Hannibal seemed to study Will would be unnerving if he wasn't already well-accustomed to it. *'Why did you stop?'*

Will swallows. The truth isn't exactly 'First Date Conversation', by his estimation. He and his Father had gotten into a fight, last fall. The big, screaming, stomping kind of fights that Will always lost. Will forgot his place, told his dad that he hated him. Ten seconds later, he was crying over the two halves of his lucky fishing rod. His dad told him not to cry unless he wanted things to get worse. They didn't get worse. He never did apologize for that. Never apologized for anything. When Christmas came around, Will got a new rod, and his dad didn't mention where the last one had gone. Just like that, Will started fishing alone. Declining every offer to go out on the water with his dad, even if it meant being stuck in the motel room all afternoon. Eventually the offers stopped coming.

Will doesn't say any of this. Instead, he forces a smile at Hannibal, tries to make it look real, and signs *'Because I'd rather be here with you.'*

He can tell that Hannibal isn't satisfied with that answer, but he smiles back anyway.

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They spend the next hour or so involved in their own activities. Will fishing in the river, enjoying the sun on his face. Hannibal sketching under the tree, lounging in the shade. It's nice. Just quietly coexisting, happy to be together even if they aren't directly interacting much. Will thinks it's nice. He prays that Hannibal isn't bored to death, but the feeling of eyes at his back tells him that he's at least enjoying the view.

At one point, Will's lure ends up snagged on a rock. He sets his jaw. If it were a worm, or a simple rubber lure, he might be tempted to risk yanking it free. If the line snapped, it would be regrettable but not the end of the word. It isn't a simple lure, though. Far from it. Maybe there wasn't anything *inherently* remarkable about the little green squarebill, it couldn't have been more than five dollars to replace it, but he'd had it for ages, now. It had too much sentimental value to risk sending it down the current.

So he whistles for Hannibal's attention, and hands him the rod. Hannibal looks confused, but takes it. Will kicks off his shoes and socks, rolls his jeans up over his knees, and wades out into the water. It's freezing, and the rocks are slippery under his soles, and the water is lapping at the bunched denim every time he moves, and Will can't wipe the smile from his face as he follows the line. He loves this, after all. Loves getting wet and dirty, and feeling something real against his skin. It's why working with boats all day would suit him just fine, if he got paid for it. It's tactile. Focused on the hands, before anything else. He finds the lure, trapped between two slick stones, and gently pries it free. He turns back toward the riverbank, hands and legs dripping wet, holding the lure aloft with a wide grin. The soft, adoring look on Hannibal's face nearly makes him lose his footing. Nearly.

Hannibal holds out an arm when Will reaches the bank, their hands clasping together as the other boy hoists him onto dry land. When he's steady on the bank, Will doesn't let go. When Hannibal looks him in the eye and licks his lips, Will doesn't let go. And when Will darts forward and captures Hannibal in a quick kiss, when Hannibal kisses him back with a soft sound of contentment, their fingers are still intertwined.

-

'You're drawing me, aren't you?'

Hannibal blinks up at him, face calm but eyes wide. Will falls to sit beside him, stretching his legs across the blanket casually.

'It's okay,' he adds. *'I just want to see it, if you're alright with that.'*

The corner of the other boy's mouth twitches upwards. He moves closer to Will, opening his sketchbook for him to see. Will looks over Hannibal's shoulder at the page. It's a spread of sketches, a few of clover flowers and lizards, but mostly of Will. Casting a line, pushing his hair out of his face, beaming back at him from the water. Will smiles, reaching out until his fingertips just brush the happy look on the drawing's face.

'I really like the way I look in your drawings, you know.'

When Hannibal turns his head to look Will in the face, their noses brush. Hannibal's breath hitches slightly.

'I aim for realism,' Hannibal signs. He's blushing to high heaven. *'You look like yourself. Or close to it, at least.'*

Will shakes his head, tapping the sketch of him that wears a big grin. *'I don't look like this. You make me look so...'* Happy? Safe? Loved? *'Pretty.'*

Hannibal breathes out a soft chuckle. *'You are pretty, Will.'*

Now it's Will's turn to blush. He knew that, of course. Knew that Hannibal found him attractive. He'd said as much very early on in their friendship. It doesn't stop it from feeling like a shock wave running through his bloodstream.

Kissing Hannibal is quickly becoming a habit, one he isn't keen on breaking. Hannibal doesn't seem to mind it, either way, so Will takes him by the jaw and kisses him hard. Like it's the only way he knows how to communicate anymore. Tactile.

Something shifts in his chest, and he feels suddenly monstrous. He's frightened and unnatural, but more than that he is a creature that is *wanting*. He hears a soft thud when Hannibal sets the sketchbook aside, and before he can even think to be scared or ashamed Hannibal is pulling him closer with arms around his back. Will's hands find their way into the other boy's hair, and Hannibal pulls back just to gasp for air. Will chases him, and the momentum of his pursuit sends Hannibal sprawling until they fall into a clumsy heap on the blanket.

For half a breath, Will is mortified, but Hannibal just laughs, and the curve of his smile tells Will exactly how to feel.

-

'Let's play a game.'

Hannibal lifts a brow, popping the last of his sandwich into his mouth. They were good. Fancy little things, with cream cheese and cucumbers and dill. Will could've eaten an embarrassing number of them, though Hannibal seemed to be pleased with how quickly Will's share disappeared.

'What sort of game?'

Will drums on his thighs for a moment, thinking to himself.

'Do you believe in ghosts?'

Hannibal seems caught between deeply confused and deeply entertained. *'Where on earth did that come from?'*

'Just answer the question.'

The other boy looks to the branches overhead, a soft smile tugging at his face. *'Wholeheartedly, yes.'*

Will nods sharply. *'Now you ask me something.'*

A look of understanding flits across his handsome features. *'Alright.'* He thinks for a moment, frowning slightly. *'Of all the places you've lived, which was your favorite?'*

He smiles. *'Here, definitely.'*

The way Hannibal visibly relaxes at that doesn't escape him.

'What's your favorite poem?'

This earns him a laugh. Hannibal leans back, his shoulders pressed to the trunk of the tree. *'Asking me to talk about poetry is dangerous, Will. You'll spoil me.'*

'I'm fine with that,' Will signs with a smirk.

Hannibal flushes, looking away. *'...It's hard to say,'* he confesses after a fashion. *'My mother used to read Alfred Lord Tennyson to me, before bed, so his work is close to my heart for sentimental reasons. The poem I've read the most, though, is by a more modern Poet. 'The Triumph of Achilles'.'* His eyes train back on Will, looking at him like he's that damned Guerìn model again. Will hardly knows what to do with himself when Hannibal looks at him like that. *'I have a new favorite, lately. Would you like to hear a part of it?'*

Will nods, licking his lips.

As Hannibal recalls the lines, his eyes don't leave Will. Not for a moment.

'It is hard to believe, when I’m with you, that there can be anything as still, as solemn, as unpleasantly definitive as statuary,
when right in front of it, in the warm New York four o’clock light— We are drifting back and forth between each other, like a tree breathing through its spectacles.
And the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint. You suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them.' Hannibal tilts his head again, in that focused, studious way that he often uses for Will. *'I look*
at you, and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world.'

Will tries to swallow. The moisture has left his mouth. His heart, which had skittered to an absolute standstill during the recitation, is racing to make up for lost time.

'Do you like it?' Hannibal prods when Will fails to answer. *'I could loan you the collection it's a part of, if you want to read the full poem. It's heavily annotated, though—'*

Will silences him with a gentle, tender kiss. He lingers from just a moment after they part, then moves to lie back against the tree beside Hannibal, so close that their shoulders bump.

'I liked it. It's a good poem.' He furrows his brows. *'Was I your first kiss?'*

Hannibal turns his head just enough to press another kiss to Will's temple. *'You were, yes.'*

'Your turn.'

He observes Hannibal's hesitant smirk from the corner of his eye.

'Am I your boyfriend, Will?'

It's stupid, really. Stupid that a frantic heat soars up the back of his neck and doesn't stop until it's reached the tips of his ears. Stupid that Will chokes on air and splutters uselessly for a handful of seconds. Stupid that his hands are a little shaky when he signs *'I guess that's up to you.'*

Hannibal narrows his eyes at that. *'Meaning?'*

Will huffs, cheeks burning furiously. *'Meaning that... I am if you want me to be.'* He tries to steel his nerves. He can feel how clammy his palms have become. *'...Do you want me to be?'*

Hannibal takes his hand. Will's heart flips uncontrollably when the other boy brings it to his lips, and presses a kiss to his knuckles. *'If it's up to me, then I'm yours, Will,'* he replies.

Will tries to make himself think. *'Okay. Yeah, okay.'*

It's a bit disquieting when Hannibal's smile falls a moment later. *'May I ask you something?'* he signs, and Will nods.

'If I told you that I've been making progress with my speech therapist, how would you feel?'

Will blinks. *'Have you been?'*

'Yes. I've been seeing her for a while now, but there was work that needed to be done with my psychiatrist before I was ready for speech therapy.'

'...I don't know,' he signs, hands balling into fists before releasing over his knees.

'You don't know how you feel?'

'If I told you that I didn't want to go to speech therapy, how would you feel?'

He refuses to look at Hannibal's face. He starts to stim again the moment he's finished talking, frightened and oddly angry. Angry at Hannibal for expecting Will to change, maybe. Angry at everyone.

'...You are happy as you are, arent you?'

Will's eyes widen. *'Yes,'* he answers. *'I think so, anyway. I mean, I wish people would leave me the hell alone, but…I like myself the way that I am.'*

'So do I.'

The cautious wave of joy and relief is enough to make him dizzy. *'Yeah?'*

Hannibal nods. *'I like you. Very much. If you don't want to change, then I don't want you to change either. Never speak for as long as you live, I won't ask you to say a single word.'*

Will laughs, more from elation than anything else. He's never felt like this before. Like someone thought he was perfect, exactly as he was. *'Thank you,'* he signs, then backtracks. *'But you miss speaking, then? You'd be happier, that way?'*

The smile Hannibal gives him is etched with a quiet sort of sadness. *'I'm not like you. My voice was taken from me, against my will. I want to move past that, someday. I want to heal, to feel like myself again. I used to speak. I used to sing, even. I sang to my sister, the same songs that our mother sang to me. I used to read aloud. Shall I recite a poem for you, one day?'*

Will answers immediately, swept away by the very idea of it. *'Yes, I'd like that. I think... I'm happy for you, Han.'*

He kisses Will's cheek, smiling fondly. *'Then I will. Soon, I hope. As I said, it's going well.'*

Will leans closer, resting his head on Hannibal's shoulder. *'What was your sister like?'*

The other boy smiles. *'Spoiled.'*

'Yeah?'

Hannibal nods. *'She would have grown out of it though, I'm sure. She was young.'* He gives Will another sad smile. *'Her name was Mischa.'*

His heart sinks. *'Hannibal, I'm so sorry.'* He chews his lip. *'You don't have to, but if there's ever anything you want to talk about-'*

'Does your father hit you, Will?'

'...what?'

The question came so suddenly that it nearly knocks Will off balance. His mind starts spinning , has the river always been so loud?

'I've seen how you speak of him. You're afraid of him, I know you are.'

He reels, searching for his footing. It takes him longer than he'd like. *'My dad's an asshole,'* he concedes with once again trembling hands. *'But he doesn't beat me!'*

'Would you tell me if he did?'

There's something in Hannibal's eyes, when Will looks back. Something honest, something protective. Something violent. Will thinks about Hannibal's story, about Mischa. He thinks about Mason.

'...I would. I promise.'

Hannibal smiles tenderly, but it doesn't quite meet his eyes. Will gets the feeling that the other boy doesn't believe him. *'I only ask because I care, you know that. Your safety is important to*

me.' His expression shifts, turning grave. *'If something ever happened to you, I don't know what I would do.'*

Will takes Hannibal by the wrist. Tugs his hand close. Kisses his knuckles, just as Hannibal had done for him.

'I'm okay,' He signs. When he releases Hannibal's hand, the other boy sets to running his fingers through Will's curls. *'Really. It's sweet that you care so much, but...I'm okay.'*

Will melts when Hannibal kisses him again, sighing in contentment. It wasn't a lie, not really. He is okay, after all. Or closer to okay than he's been in a long time, at least. Isn't this what okay looks like? Like kissing your first boyfriend in the shade of a sweetgum tree? He isn't sure.

But when he pictures a life where he feels okay, it looks like this.

Bigger Things

Chapter Notes

I promise this is the last 'Spring Break' chapter lol I just CARE about WILL

The worst six months of Will's entire life were when they lived in St. Louis. The thought process behind it was salient, he couldn't fault his father for that. Big city, right on the water, bound to have plenty of people with boats that needed fixing. And it did, which was why they stayed. It was the best money they'd ever made. He'd gotten his guitar for his birthday that year, an expense that had felt so lavish at the time that he'd even tried to decline the gift. He cringes at the memory, now. His twelve year-old self, so scared of looking selfish or spoiled. He likes to think he's growing out of that. Slowly and not entirely by his own choice. No, he has Hannibal Lecter to thank for that.

But the money wasn't worth it. Nowhere near it. His dad was stressed from all of their clients, which made him more volatile than ever. He was unpredictable, turning on a dime whenever the air shifted. And the work was hard, and the hours were long, and Will was so exhausted that he got in trouble for falling asleep at school more than once.

Worst of all, though, was the noise. The building they lived in was crowded, and smoky, and so, so *loud.* The people who lived above them fought at least thrice a week, shouting and stomping at all hours of the night.

Their neighbors on the wall nearest to where Will slept got along, though. Too well. He'd been too young to even understand the things he heard, not really. Hearing the woman screaming for her daddy not to stop, still at a phase in his life where he was only just figuring out how to jerk off— it made him feel unsettled and annoyed. He spent a lot of nights putting his pillow over his head, and a few giving up and dragging his blanket and pillow into the bathroom to sleep in the tub.

It's much better here, for sure. He still wishes he had a room of his own, of course. And the curtains are too thin to actually block much sunlight. But he usually sleeps through the night, which is saying something. Will is a *very* light sleeper, after all. Trained himself to be. Shifts to high alert if the air so much as moves wrong, just in case. So it's lucky that he gets to sleep until dawn, more often than not.

A thundering crash sounds outside, and Will blinks to attention, letting out a soft groan immediately.

He gets to sleep until dawn. Just, not long after dawn.

Somewhere, hidden within the winding roads of this town but seemingly not far off, there is a construction site. Will hasn't been able to locate where it is or what they're building, but evidently it's a very work-intensive project, because the noise from their machinery wakes him up first thing in the morning. Just as it has every day for the two and a half months they've been here.

He drags a hand down his face. He could roll over and go back to sleep. He's done it before. The sound of his stomach coaxes him to the kitchen instead.

His father, on the other hand, is a heavy sleeper. Nothing alike, as usual. Sometimes Will wonders if he might be adopted. It's pretty obvious that he isn't, though. They have the same nose. They make the same faces. Have the same blood, whatever that's worth.

Will pads over to the kitchenette, pulling a box of instant oatmeal from the cabinet. He rips two packets open, one peach and one blueberry, and dumps them both into a bowl. Adds a bit of water from the tap and shoves it into the microwave. He refills the coffee pot, replaces the filter, and scoops some grounds in. It twists a knife in his pride, doing things like this, but the fact of the matter is that his father will be in a better mood if he wakes up to fresh coffee. There are bigger things than his pride, at the end of the day.

He stretches, neck popping loudly. He can practically hear Hannibal in his mind, fretting over the long-term effects of sleeping on a pull-out sofa. Will casts his bleary eyes toward the clock on the wall. He's still got about an hour until his dad is likely to roll out of bed.

Good.

After scarfing down breakfast, the increasingly-present voice that he knows as Hannibal's Influence begging him to have something more substantial, he sits down on the couch with his journal, and writes.

'The Beast has learned Envy.

Whispered rumor, living on lips that haunt street corners and back alleys, awful.

Pale when it meets your ear. Sunken under unbearable weight.

If it can learn, is it Beast or Man? What comes next?

Can it learn to seek me out. Can it learn to pick a lock, to hold a knife, to speak harsh words.

You alone know the horrible truth of it. You know how much it has already been taught.

You fed it scraps of meat from your kitchen and taught it Gluttony.
You whispered sweetly in its ear and taught it Lust.
You suffered in its place, and it learned that Wrath had a name.

You let it watch you. Gentle in the shade, languishing with sweet lips and a mouth filled to bursting with sentiments. Clever words, tempting, inspired.

Oh, the Beast knows Envy.'

His heart aches as his mind drifts of its own accord, and he almost rolls his eyes at himself. It's been days since he's seen Hannibal. Only days, he reminds himself firmly. And only days more, until he sees the other boy again.

Until he sees his *boyfriend* again.

Will grins down at the paper. Boyfriend. Will has a boyfriend. Someone who *sees* him. It's made him stupid, really. Head slow and soft where it floats in the warm brown of Hannibal's eyes.

So stupid, in fact, that he doesn't notice the rustles and creaks coming from the bedroom. The telltale sounds of his father rising for the morning.

He tries to resist the impulse to slam the journal shut when the bedroom door opens, his dad stumbling groggily into the living room area. Closing it too fast would look suspicious. He sets his pen down on the coffee table first, trying like hell to put down the journal in a way that looks natural.

'Morning,' he tries.

"What were you writing?" His father asks, gesturing down to the book.

Fuck.

'Just brainstorming,' Will lies, projecting nonchalance even though his heart is pounding. *'Stuff for class.'*

The older man's eyes narrow, frowning at the book and then at Will. "You've got homework during Spring Break?"

Fuck, *fuck,* he can feel the color leave his face. *'It was assigned a while ago. I've kind of been putting it off.'* He forces a smile, but he nearly sobs when his father moves to pick it up. *'It's for my English class. Creative writing unit.'*

His dad flips to a page near the middle, and Will fights the need to strain his neck, just to know how irrevocably screwed he is.

'It's pretty boring,' he adds, trying to assert disinterest. He's studying every twitch of his old man's face, waiting for the shoe to drop. *'But I'm doing my best to just get through it.'*

He turns the page. Will balls his hands into fists to keep them from noticeably shaking. His father's frown deepens.

"You been writing notes to your friends in this, too?"

Will nods nervously, bracing himself. Frantically, he tries to recall every conversation he's had with that notebook in hand. Everything he's said in the past two months. Searching for

anything incriminating. A fine sweat blooms on his brow. His father is silent for two seconds, five.

Will is preparing his apologies to St. Peter when his dad huffs dismissively, tossing the book back onto the table before moving to fix himself a cup of coffee. It's still open, to a page filled with Will's side of a conversation. Some boring lunch talk, with the kids at Margot's table. Nothing incriminating. Light complaints about his Trig teacher, idle gossip.

"Don't put shit off until the last minute, Willy," his dad says as he pours powdered creamer into his mug. "I know you've had time to work on it."

Still trembling, Will turns the page. Glances with frantic eyes over the very next page, the one his dad would have seen if he'd flipped just one more thin sheet of paper.

'I didn't think you were coming!' 'Are you drunk?' 'Do you want a drink?'

He swallows, but his throat is dry.

'You weren't my first kiss, Margot. Hannibal Lecter was.'

He feels the air whistle against his cheek with how narrowly he just missed that bullet. It makes him dizzy, faint. He takes a shaking breath and moves to shove the notebook back into his bag, making a mental vow to burn that page as soon as he gets an opportunity. Hannibal taunts him again. 'You're getting reckless, you know.'

Maybe so, but the risks offered sweet enough rewards, in his eyes.

He shakes his head, joining the other man on the couch. If his dad knows that he just sent Will through the five stages of grief in under two minutes, he doesn't show it.

The TV flickers on, and his father switches channels until the screen bears Pat Sajak's face. Will feels himself relaxing almost instantly, focus switching to the rows of white squares. They're partway through the puzzle already— a few T's, some S's, a W. The topic is 'Before and After'.

'Jehovah's Witness Protection Program,' Will signs after a minute, and his dad rolls his eyes.

"You can't already know it."

'I do.'

The contestant guesses C. It pops up just where it should.

'See?'

His dad narrows his eyes. "You're cheating."

Will laughs. *'How would I be cheating?'*

"You've seen this one," he answers, taking a large sip of his coffee.

Pat Sajak's voice is scratchy through the speakers. 'Any R's? Three R's on the board, look at that.'

'I'm just good at this game, you know that,' Will insists.

"Uh-huh."

'Make up a puzzle, right now. I'll solve it.'

His dad shakes his head, muttering around the rim of his coffee cup. "Too smart for your own good, don't know where the hell you get that."

Will grins, sitting cross-legged while he watches the contestants spin and guess and fumble. This isn't the first time his father has commented on his skills at game shows, and it won't be the last. He has a knack for it. Well, some games. He's pretty rotten at The Price Is Right, and his skill at Jeopardy varies wildly depending on the offering of categories. He excels at Family Feud, but the Wheel is where Will truly shines. His dad often jokes about trying to get Will on an episode, even. Usually followed by an 'if you ever learned to talk' that is likely *meant* to be taken as a joke. Will tries to laugh it off, anyway.

When the puzzle is solved, Will grins at his dad. 'Jehovah's Witness Protection Program' is plastered there in bold black letters.

Neither of them says anything, but his dad smirks as he drains the last of his coffee.

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"So, where do you wanna go after this?"

Will frowns at him. His dad looks up from the engine, waiting for Will's greasy hands to move.

'I thought you said that we needed to go to the grocery store.'

His dad huffs. "Not like that, Willy. I mean when we move. Where do you want to set up shop next?"

He blinks. He's never been offered any choice in that matter. He wasn't expecting to. Luckily, there's no need to think it over.

'I like it here,' Will signs.

The older man shakes his head. "Don't get what you see in this place," he grumbles, grunting as he tightens a bolt. "I mean, I'm glad you're not complaining for once, but it doesn't seem that different from Cedar Rapids. And you were miserable there."

Will shrugs, looking to the shimmering water with a soft smile. *'The people here are different,'* he replies after a fashion. Instantly, his mind is flooded with toothy smiles, soft lips, strong hands stained with charcoal on his own skin. *'Better.'*

His father snorts. "Didn't seem like you were too popular when you came home with a black eye a couple weeks ago."

He wrinkles his nose. Mason. *'The good outweighs the bad,'* he replies. He thinks of Hannibal. His bloody knuckles after teaching Mason a lesson long overdue. His tender, studios gaze as he assessed Will's wounds. The unsure brush of his lips when Will told him that he'd never been seen the way Hannibal saw him. God, he never wants to leave. *'Trust me.'*

-

Will's eyes more or less glaze over as he follows his dad through the aisles. His thoughts are a distant blur, miles away from the supermarket.

School starts back in a few days. Monday will be his first day at school with a secret boyfriend. The first time he'll sit beside Hannibal in English class, and know that they're both thinking about kissing each other. At least, Will knows he'll be thinking about kissing Hannibal. He thinks about it nearly every minute, even when Hannibal isn't around. Having him near but not being able to touch him will be maddening.

He's halfway through a fantasy where Hannibal sneaks him into the janitor's closet because he's too impatient to wait, kissing him breathless, when he hears a familiar voice from the other end of the aisle.

"Will?"

Will's posture goes board straight, frozen in place like he's been caught red-handed. Please don't come over, please don't come over, please don't—

"Hey, Will!"

His dad frowns at him as Brian Zeller approaches, smile plastered on his face. Oh, hell.

Will salutes Brian in greeting, forcing a tight smile that becomes a little more genuine when Brian salutes back.

"How's it going, man? You cutting loose or what?"

He shrugs, wishing he could disappear. His dad clears his throat and Brian immediately turns sheepish.

"Oh! Sorry," He thrusts out a sweaty hand. "I'm Brian, it's nice to meet you, Mister Graham."

Will's father gives the hand a suspicious look before shaking it. "I'm guessing you're one of Will's school friends?"

Brian smirks. "Some might even say we're best friends, sir."

Will bites his tongue.

"Will's never mentioned a 'Brian'," His dad replies, and Will nearly chokes. "Just some gal named Beverly, and a couple of boys that hang around her."

Will snorts. It's rarely intentional when the man makes him laugh, but sometimes his dad is very, very funny.

To his credit, Brian takes it in stride. "I *have* been told I'm skilled at hanging around, yes." He turns back to Will. "You know, it's crazy that we've never even seen your house."

It's not crazy. It's a very intentional thing that no one sees where he and his father live. Not even Hannibal has seen it.

"You should have us all over, sometime!" the other boy insists. "We could order a pizza and watch one of your scary movies!"

He sighs. In another world, that would actually sound really, really nice. He's never invited friends over before, but imagining it now makes him wish he could.

And then he pictures the look on Beverly's face when she realizes that Will doesn't even have his own bedroom, and the idea makes his mouth turn sour.

Will gives him an indication of a soft 'maybe', and then a woman with a dark bob haircut and pointed glasses hisses for Brian's attention.

"In a sec, Ma!" He calls back, then nods to Will. "I'll see you at school, yeah? We can float the idea to the guys!"

Will hopes his grimace can be mistaken for a smile.

"Startin' to see what you mean about the kids here being 'different'," his dad mutters when Brian walks away, and Will snorts again.

'Brian's not so bad. He grows on you.'

The older man huffs, tossing a package of cheese into the cart. "If you say so."

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It's a sensory thing, playing the guitar. Lets him stim without attracting the wrong kind of attention. Hands always moving, the melodic sounds and resulting vibrations pleasant to his senses as his fingers pluck at strings and slide along frets. His dad approves of it, too. Encourages him to continue every time he picks the instrument up.

He's fluttering through an old favorite, guitar cradled in his arm while his dad cooks up some hot dogs. 'Sittin' On Top of the World'.

His dad whistles low. "You're getting good on that thing, Willy."

Will smiles to himself, still thumbing his way through another verse. The lyrics echo in his head as he plays. 'You don't like my peaches, don't you shake my tree. Get out of my orchard,

let the peaches be.'

He's surprised when his father starts to sing along, low and flat and tuneless. "Now she's gone," he croons, picking up exactly where Will was. "And I don't worry. Lord I'm sittin' on top of the world." His dad chuckles. "One of these days I'm gonna get you to sing, I swear. You'll be a regular Marty Robbins."

Will falters. It's another backhanded compliment. They almost always are. Nothing Will does is ever just *good* in his father's eyes. Only ever *nearly good.* Still, it's better than nothing, he supposes.

When dinner's ready, his dad takes a seat on the couch and turns on the TV.

"You know, they're playing *Alien* on Channel Nineteen tonight," he says, and Will can hear the awkwardness straining his voice. "Should be on in about twenty minutes if you wanna watch it with me."

Will smiles, nodding in a flash. He's already seen *Alien* five times, but it's been ages since the two of them watched a movie together.

His father looks pleased, then he grimaces slightly. "You know, son... I guess you really could have those friends of yours over, sometime. If you wanted."

A part of him wants to reply with all the bitterness he feels. To say 'Why? so that I can show them that I have nothing? So that they can see how I live— how you *let* me live?'

But today has been a good day. Better than he usually gets, when it's just his dad and himself. He's managed to keep the older man in a good mood from dawn to dusk, which is no small task. Stayed on his good side. Kept from starting a fight. He's desperate, he realizes, to end this day on a good note.

There are bigger things than his pride.

'Yeah. Maybe I will.'

-

In the end, his dad falls asleep halfway through *Alien.* Passed out on the couch, snoring loudly. Will isn't too disappointed about it, just finishes the movie alone, but then he realizes that he now has a choice to make.

He could wake the man. Rouse him enough for him to stumble to bed and let Will unfold the sofa. Or, he could crash in the bed.

The choice practically makes itself.

He curls up in the center of the wide mattress, pulling the blanket up to his chin and melting into the warmth.

Helpless, he thinks of Hannibal as he drifts. He'll see the other boy soon. Only a few days. Will he be bold enough to hold Hannibal's hand under their desks? To flirt with him and make him blush at lunch? To kiss him quickly in the parking lot before speeding off to work? He wants to be.

He'll see Margot, too, he realizes. And she will want to know what happened, after Will left her house that night. He wonders how much he should tell her, how much Hannibal would want her to know. Shit, the two of them should probably talk about that.

There are other things he'll be facing. Mason Verger will be back, new nose and all. Bev will likely interrogate him about why he left Margot's party early, and he'll have to tell her *something.* Alana Bloom will be there, with her pear perfume and her sad eyes and her unrequited feelings.

Those thoughts get pushed to the wayside, though, in favor of fantasy. Saccharine daydreams, always starring Hannibal Lecter. Lounging by the water. Sleeping in Will's flannel. Reading poetry by his window. Tucking a strand of Will's hair behind his ear.

All in all, It's a good day.

Loose Lips

Chapter Notes

thanks for the patience on this update! I ended up taking a week off last week so it set me back a little.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's nervous, making his way to class on Monday morning. Jittery. Will's always been one to look over his shoulder, always waiting for the next threat to show its face, but he finds himself glancing around the hallways more than usual. Waiting for Mason to appear, maybe, leering at him with a bandaged face and a plan for vengeance. Or for a new danger to swoop in, faceless until the very moment that it staggers into the light, and by then it will be too late.

As he winds through the sea of students, most of them lamenting hangovers or tittering about trips out of town, Will is left with the overwhelming impression that people are looking at him more than usual. Any amount is more than usual, really. The student body is usually more than happy to aid Will in his quest to blend with the architecture, to just become another piece of the building. And yet today, he catches his peers watching him. Staring without staring, peeking from their peripheries or glancing his way and averting their gazes when Will looks back.

He tries to chalk it up to paranoia. He has something to hide, now, that's all. A secret worth keeping. It's only natural, to feel anxious about that secret being uncovered. The Beast, braced for the angry townsfolk to light their torches and sharpen their pitchforks. Still, no amount of rationality makes him feel less like people are talking about him. He swears he hears his name on a few people's lips.

It's easy, as it turns out, to make that anxiety melt away.

Seeing Hannibal's face when he walks into Honors English feels exactly like the sun on Will's cheeks. It feels like he's been waiting for it all winter long, instead of just a few days. It's so simple. He steps through the door, and Hannibal glances up from his sketchbook, and those big brown eyes narrow with fondness. That's all that happens. Hannibal smiles at him, Will smiles back, and then Will falls into his seat.

It doesn't feel simple, though. Far from it. It feels like one of the most important things that's ever happened. Write it down in the history books— on this day, Hannibal Lecter smiled at Will Graham.

At the front of the class, their teacher is preparing for the bell to ring. All around them, their classmates are catching up, relaying their Spring Break experiences to one another.

Will is only looking at Hannibal. Hannibal is looking back.

'Hi.'

Hannibal sets down his pencil, and Will basks in the other boy's undivided attention.

'I missed you.'

Will bites his lip. His face turns hot in record time as his heart skitters awkwardly. *'I missed you, too,'* he signs back, because it's true.

He spends the majority of class not paying attention and watching Hannibal from the corner of his eye. Resisting, somehow, the urge to turn in his seat and look at him. If things were different, he'd be openly staring the entire time.

The creature, when he first feels that keen sense of loneliness, begs Frankenstein for a companion. Someone like him, someone with golden eyes. Someone who the creature could lie beside, and count the knobs of their crooked spine, and see the sun reflected on their matted raven hair. Frankenstein refuses his creation that companionship, but Will likes to think of the monster and his bride, shambling down a shady lane. The townsfolk flee in terror wherever they go, but Frankenstein's blasphemous child doesn't notice. Too caught up in the unnatural slant of her split lips, the throaty gurgle in her voice, the way his long-congealed blood starts to churn again. Not by the insistence of the supernatural, but by the most natural thing in all the world.

What would happen, if he did stare at Hannibal? Would Mason Verger start making his life a living hell, if Will held Hannibal's hand in the hallway? It doesn't feel like it would make a difference. People beating him up, avoiding him, calling him a fag— he'd experienced all of that ten times over, hadn't he? He might as well get something out of it. Get to walk Hannibal to class and put his arm around him at lunch and kiss him in the back row of the movie theater.

He can't. He knows that. Knows that all it would take is one kid gossiping in front of their dad, one customer who saw them together, one person at the bar saying *'Heard about your boy, Graham. Don't worry, he'll grow out of it.'*

And then.

Then.

Will glances over his shoulder. Hannibal is copying down notes from the board, but then he catches Will. Smiles. Will smiles, too.

Will's never had anything that he could be truly selfish with. Never had something that was just his to keep. The way Hannibal Lecter blushes, though— that doesn't belong to their classmates, or Mason Verger, or Will's Father. It's theirs. Hannibal's and Will's.

He finds that he enjoys being selfish with Hannibal's attention.

Hannibal breaks eye contact first, forcing his gaze back down to the pages of his notebook. Will tries to do the same. To focus. It's harder than it should be.

A few minutes later, Will breaks and looks Hannibal's way. Hannibal is looking back.

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"Hey man. Listen, I've gotta talk to you."

Will frowns up at Brian, following him to the edge of the hallway and pausing in his shuffle to Health Class. Brian looks rattled, and Will feels a sudden rush of secondhand anxiety.

"I was gonna tell you the other day," he says, leaning closer to Will. He's scanning the halls, like he's watching out for something. "But if I'm being honest with you, your dad scared the shit out of me."

Will manages a weak laugh. He cocks his head in interest, waiting for Brian to share his secret. Brian blows out a long breath, bracing himself before he speaks. When he does, it leaves in a rush, like ripping off a band-aid.

"I made out with Bev last week."

Will blinks. He can't disguise how his eyes go wide. How on Earth did Brian manage that?

"It was after that party, at Margot's place?" he continues, hands jammed into his pockets. "She had more to drink than me— I mean, she wasn't wasted or anything, but I still didn't want her to drive home. So I made her give me her car keys."

Will lifts his hands on instinct, and Brian is already rolling his eyes. "I know, I know, I don't even have a license, but I didn't want her to get hurt! So I drove her home, told her I'd just walk back to my place, and she just leaned over and... yeah. We kind of made out."

Will just nods along, hoping he doesn't look as shell-shocked as he feels.

"Hey, but don't tell Bev that I told you, yeah? I don't want her to think I'm bragging to everyone who'll listen."

He arches a brow, as if to say 'Aren't you?'

Brian huffs. "I'm only telling you because I know you won't tell anybody, Will." He turns his head, pointedly looking away. "And, you know, you're one of my best friends, so."

Will shakes his head, but he's smiling. Brian laughs.

"You are! I mean, Jimmy and Bev are always gonna be my best friends, but I can't exactly talk to Bev about it, and we both know Jimmy would tell half the school before lunch." Both boys chuckle at that, and Brian lightly punches Will's shoulder.

"But I can trust you," He says, searching Will's face. "Right?"

Will tries to look sincere when he nods, to come off as trustworthy. He's becoming very acquainted with secrets, lately. For better or worse. He reckons he's hiding at least a few things from everyone he knows. It occurs to him that the average person might feel guilty

about that. There's a lump meant to be perched at the back of his throat, that if someone poked it, all of the things he's been hiding would come spilling out like a sinful fountain. There certainly was a time that he felt that way.

He's developing a taste for hiding, maybe.

Brian sighs, shaking out his shoulders like he's just set down a great weight. "Feels so good to get that off my chest man," he says, then he grins almost wolfishly. "But hey, from what I've heard I'm not the only one who got some action last weekend, right?"

The other boy elbows him playfully when he speaks, and Will freezes. His blood goes cold.

"Come on, don't play shy, man. Everybody's talking about it."

Will looks to Brian with panic in his eyes. He can't be talking about Will, can he? No. No one knows about Hannibal and himself. That night outside Hannibal's house, in his dad's stolen truck— no one had seen them, had they? Maybe a car had passed by, once or twice, but—

"I can't believe you hooked up with Margot Verger!"

Will nearly breathes a sigh of relief before his confusion plummets even deeper.

"I mean, I know people like to stretch the truth when shit like this goes around, but I heard a bunch of people saying they *saw* you kiss her, and then you followed her to her parents' room." Brian's eyes are alight with mischief. "How far did you get with her? Just nod or shake your head. Second base?"

His mind is reeling. The party. Spin the bottle. Will following Margot into her parents' bedroom. How long had they been in there, alone in that room? Long enough for it to look like they hooked up? Will really isn't sure, he hadn't even thought about it at the time. Couldn't remember if anyone looked at him differently as he sped from that room back out to his dad's truck. People are certainly looking at him differently today, though.

He scans the hallway and yes, people really *are* looking at him. It was never just in his head, they're gossiping about him. Not about his relationship with Hannibal but his relationship with *Margot.*

The gravity of the situation slams into him all at once, nearly crushing him to the ground.

Everyone is talking about it.

Everyone.

He takes off without a backward glance, running down the hall. Brian's 'We'll talk about it later, I guess' barely meets his ears. His heart is thundering, he's pushing past other students, nearly crashing into a group of girls near the water fountains.

Which class does Hannibal have for second period? Calculus? His feet are already taking him in that direction. How long does he have until the bell rings? Three minutes? Two? He won't make it to his own class in time if he takes this detour. It doesn't matter.

He turns a corner, trips over his laces, barely catches himself. Keeps running. He just has to be the first one to tell Hannibal, that's all. Just has to get to him, look into those pretty brown eyes and say 'I kissed Margot Verger. It was one kiss. It meant nothing. I like you, and I'm sorry. I like you, and I'm sorry.'

I like you, and I'm sorry.

Suddenly he's being snatched by the wrist. He stops in his tracks, whipping around to see Margot Verger looking back at him.

"Will," she says, and her voice feels like it's miles away beyond the panic roaring in his head. "Will, I'm so sorry. I didn't have anything to do with this. You know that, right?"

A petulant little piece of him wants to snap at her, anyway. To blame her for the mess he's found himself in.

Margot looks distressed. Genuine, like she only ever wanted him to have some fun that night. He knows it's true. Margot is his friend. He cares for her.

"I've been telling people that nothing happened all morning, but you know how they are..."

All the while, Will is scanning the halls. Searching.

"I'm sorry."

His heart stops when Will sees him. Standing there, eyes full of hurt and betrayal, and Will just... knows. Knows that he wasn't quick enough. That Hannibal has already heard people saying that Will had sex with Margot, that night. Mere minutes before throwing stones at Hannibal's window and coaxing him down from his bedroom.

Hannibal's eyes flick downwards and Will follows the motion, his gaze locking on his own hand. His wrist, still gripped tightly in Margot's grasp. She seems to realize at the same moment as Will does, quickly pulling away. The look on Hannibal's face nearly shatters him.

Will moves to close the space between them, already lifting his hands, ready to beg for Hannibal's forgiveness. I like you and I'm sorry, I like you and I'm sorry, I like you and—

Hannibal turns on his heel, lowering his head and making a beeline for his next class. Frantic, Will follows him.

He crowds over Hannibal's desk the moment the other boy crashes into it, scowling at his sketchbook and outright refusing to look up at Will.

'Han, you have to listen to me, this is all a huge misunderstanding.'

"Will Graham?" Hannibal's Calculus teacher. Will ignores her. Hannibal is still fixed on the page beneath him. Will crouches, forcing himself into the other boy's eye line.

'It wasn't my fault. It's not what you think, I swear.'

"Mr. Graham, you should be hurrying to your next class now. I won't let you interrupt mine."

'Fuck's sake, Han, just look at me!'

The sound of the bell ringing sounds suspiciously like funerary taps playing. Hannibal does look up at him, finally. Will almost wishes he hadn't.

He's hurt. He's sad. He's *furious.* What hurts Will the most, though, is that he doesn't look surprised.

"I'm giving you one last chance to leave my class, or I'm giving you detention, Will."

Will stumbles backwards from Hannibal's desk, shakily moving for the door. He takes one last look in his boyfriend's direction. Hannibal looks back, glaring. Will brings his right hand to his chest.

'I'm sorry,' he signs, and the door closes, leaving Will alone in the empty hallway.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter will pick up immediately where this one leaves off!

The Right Thing

Chapter Notes

> thank you so much for being patient with me! I promise I do NOT anticipate the next break between chapters being anywhere NEAR that long— this was just an unfortunate case of many things in my personal life getting in the way

Everything is loud.

The hum of the fluorescents overhead feels like a drill on the backs of Will's teeth, his shaggy hair brushes the back of his neck and makes his head tic to the side once, twice. His hands clench into fists and release again and again, his heart racing.

The emptiness of the hallway feels like it could swallow him whole. His body moving of its own accord, he ducks through a side door and finds himself outside.

He sits with his back against the exterior wall of the school, sun-warmed bricks at his back. In the back of his mind, he knows that he's about to be in massive amounts of trouble. Being late to Health class will earn him detention, and when his dad finds out that he cut class he'll be pissed, and Will is going to be punished at home in addition to school.

And that's not the only trouble he's in. For the second time, he's hurt Hannibal. He was lucky to be forgiven, before. Beyond lucky. He can't possibly expect Hannibal to be so gracious again. No, he knows what happens when he doesn't learn his lesson. He'll be thankful if Hannibal ever speaks to him again.

His teeth press together so tightly he almost thinks one might snap, jaw clenched painfully as he glares at the scuffed toes of his worn sneakers. Tears prick at his eyes and he chokes them back. Will can't cry, he won't. He wants to cry, though. He wants to scream, to rip his own skin off like a molting spider, his body is too *small,* why is everything so loud?

The knock of his skull against the wall feels like it sends his brain ricocheting, careening like a pinball in his cramped head. He curls into a ball immediately after, hands braced at the base of his skull. He's been here before. Knows that if he lets himself start, he won't stop until someone makes him. Will tries to breathe through his nose, to make the world smaller by force. *Smash your brains out in the fucking shower if you want, Willy. It's not gonna fix you.*

His head is between his knees. A dozen deep breaths later, his bones stop rattling. His entire body aches from being wound so tight, but at least he's starting to relax. With limbs like sandbags, he forces himself to stand. He trudges again through the halls, ready as he'll ever be to face the music. For the world to come crashing around him like a house of cards. He braces himself when he grips the door handle, wincing as he slowly opens it.

Every eye in the room turns to Will, haunting the doorway. His stomach swoops, he wants to curl in on himself, to hide. There's nowhere to go.

Mr. Blair looks up from his desk, setting down his pen. "Oh, there you are, Will," he says. His tone is casual, but he beckons Will closer while his classmates return their attention to the notes on the board.

Will stands before the desk, waiting for the anvil to drop over his head. He'd rather be crushed than wait any longer, anyway. At least once he's been beaten down, he can stop flinching at every movement and just focus on getting back up.

When Mr. Blair speaks, he's nearly whispering, leaning over the desk.

"How're you feeling?"

Will blinks. What?

The teacher clears his throat. "Your friend Bev warned me about your..." He hesitates. *"episode."*

He glances over his shoulder, catching Bev's eye. She looks up from her notebook, a sly smile on her face.

"Are you sure you're ready to come back? You look pale. You can head to the nurse's office, if you need to. I'm not sure what she could do for you, but—"

Will shakes his head quickly, not daring to look this gift horse in its mouth. He snatches a pencil from Mr. Blair's desk and jots down a quick **'I'm ok, thanks'** on the top of his stack of Post-Its before shuffling hurriedly to his seat.

Bev watches him from the corner of her eye as he pulls his notebook from his bag, immediately writing on the edge closest to the girl.

'episode?'

Bev huffs, replying in the margins of her own notebook. **'I came in right before the bell rang and saw you weren't here, so I told Mr. Blair you were having a Meltdown.'**

He lifts his brows. Not bad. In the midst of a thousand other conversations, tangents building on tangents like the world's least coherent Venn Diagram, Beverly has picked up a few basic principles of his Autism. Enough, apparently, to weaponize it when needed.

'Well thanks for having my back. That was really cool of you,' he writes, still a bit dizzy from the dodging of that bullet.

The orange rubber eraser cap on the end of Bev's pencil bounces off of her page quickly as she fidgets for a moment.

'Were you? Having a Meltdown?'

He sighs, propping his head in his palm. **'I'm fine.'**

'You can talk to me, you know. About anything.'

Will's heart twists. He really, really wishes that were true. Bev would know what to do about this whole mess, Will feels sure of that. She would tell him to relax, to stop catastrophizing, and he would believe her. She'd tell him what to say, how to say it. Bev always knows what to say.

'I know. But I'm really fine.'

She doesn't believe him. That much is obvious. She just sighs, shrugs her shoulders, and starts taking notes again.

He watches her for a moment, observing the sharp annoyance on her face. Why is it beginning to feel like Will isn't allowed to win?

'Thanks, though. That means a lot.'

Bev just nods, offering him a tight-looking smile.

They don't talk again for the rest of class.

-

Will spends every class before lunch writing. Not working, no, he can't possibly work right now. The only thought on his mind is Hannibal— what he should say, how Hannibal must feel, how he *looked* at Will this morning. He doesn't know how to even begin to fix this, or if he even can. Most of the time, when his dad is angry with him, there isn't a solution. There's no 'right thing' that Will can say. It's a storm that he waits out, and when it passes and he's assessing the damage, he doesn't wonder how he could've stopped it from raining. He's hoping, though, that Hannibal might be different.

At the end of it all, he has five sheets of paper covered with crossed-out lines.

'Han, I'm sorry, but this is being blown way out of proportion—'

'Hannibal— I wouldn't have come to your house that night if I didn't have feelings for you—'

'Do you have any idea how much I'm risking just by being with you? Why would I do that if I wasn't serious about—'

'Please don't hate me—'

'...I think I might be in L—'

Every single one ends up in the trash can, his frustration mounting with every second as he tries to navigate the twisted labyrinth of his feelings.

By the time he's half-running to the cafeteria, he's more eager to just get it over with than anything else. Seeing Hannibal denounce him will hurt, but then it will be over. He steps into the room, eyes locking onto their table.

It's empty. Hannibal isn't there. Will looks to Margot's table, confusion clear on his face. Margot shakes her head minutely, shoulders rising and falling in a helpless gesture.

Fuck.

-

Will pushes the hair out of his face as he paces outside the cafeteria. Think, Will: Where would Hannibal Lecter go to hide?

He chews the inside of his cheek. Nowhere, that's the answer his mind supplies. Hannibal has never seemed like the sort of person to have a hiding place. Hannibal hides in plain sight, always on the periphery but never entirely out of sight. No one ever seeks him out, except for Will. It might be the first time he's needed to hide in a long time.

His stomach drops. God, he really fucked his up.

Think. Think. *'Is there anything happening in that head of yours, boy? Hold up three fingers if you can hear me.'*

Will shakes his head. Places Han might go. The library, maybe? Christ, he doesn't know. Hannibal likes to be *alone,* doesn't he? Maybe he should just give him some space. He drags a hand down his face. This isn't fair, no one ever taught him how to *do* this.

He tries to center himself, to stop being paralyzed with indecision long enough to act. As he stares out at the school parking lot, a flash of blue catches his eye.

His feet are moving before he can second-guess himself.

-

His knuckles hit the window in three quick knocks. Hannibal is inside, knees curled to his chest in the back seat. He doesn't look up when Will knocks, glaring at his own folded hands. Will's heart sinks. Hannibal's eyes are rimmed with red, his cheeks stained with tacky tracks.

Will knocks again.

'Go away, Will.'

It feels definitive. Final. He can't think of a clearer rejection.

So why aren't his feet moving?

Hannibal told him to leave him alone. Game over. The only thing going against Hannibal's wishes will earn him is a potential fight, and Will isn't a fighter. *"What the fuck's gotten into you, Willy? Shut up and stop crying!"*

Will stays put. Clenches and relaxes his hands. Five seconds pass, then ten. Hannibal sighs visibly from within the car, still not looking up.

'...The door isn't locked.'

For this first time in hours, a smile tugs at Will's lips. He opens the door, sitting beside Hannibal. He lifts his hands, searching for the right thing to say. It doesn't come.

'I've never seen you cry before.'

Will cringes the moment he says it. He might not know the right thing to say, but that definitely wasn't it.

And yet Hannibal looks up at him, his wet eyes reproachful. *'I've never needed to cry in front of you before.'*

'Are you okay?' Again, Will knows that it's stupid. Again, he can't stop himself.

'Is that really what you came to ask?'

Will's fingers twitch. More than anything, he wants to reach out. To rub the stubborn tears from Hannibal's cheeks and kiss his frowning lips and make it clear that Will would never choose anyone else over him.

'No,' he admits. *'But I care more about you being okay than I care about me being forgiven.'*

Hannibal sighs. His face softens, just slightly, and Will's relief is enormous. He watches Hannibal uncurl from his previous position, knee nearly bumping Will's.

'Did you kiss Margot Verger?'

He takes a breath, looks at Hannibal with what he hopes is a sufficiently apologetic expression, nods.

'Why?'

A valid question. Still not one he's prepared to answer. Not out loud, at least. *'Not because I like her, that's for sure. I mean, she's nice and all, but we aren't exactly one another's types.'*

He considers telling Hannibal more. That Margot Verger likes girls, and that she knows about his and Hannibal's relationship. It doesn't feel like it's his secret to tell, though.

'Why didn't you tell me, if you don't have feelings for her?'

Ah, now *there's* an easy question. *'Because I'm stupid.'*

Hannibal huffs, and Will feels cautiously elated when the other boy scoots a few inches closer. *'You aren't stupid, Will.'*

'With this, I am,' he argues. *'With you. I've never felt like this before, I don't know what to do with myself when we're together.'*

The other boy smiles, and it makes Will bold. He turns, easily within reach of Hannibal now. *But I promise I never wanted to hurt you, Han. I'm sorry— for kissing her, and for not telling you. But I meant it when I told you that I liked you, okay? I want you, not anybody else.'*

He doesn't respond for a moment, and Will panics. His fists tighten over the knees of his jeans, his heart speeds up.

Hannibal's kiss is gentle, when it meets him. Tender, almost shy. Will sighs softly against the other boy's lips, taking his face in both hands. He tips his head forwards when they part, pressing their foreheads together for a moment before releasing him.

'I forgive you,' Hannibal signs, and Will doesn't know what to say, so he darts forward and kisses him again.

'Thank you.'

Hannibal looks happy again, which wasn't something Will had been brave enough to hope for before now. *'Is there anything else you need to say?'* He prods.

Will grimaces. *'...I may have also kissed Alana Bloom.'*

Hannibal nods, a slight smirk on his face. *'I'd heard. I wouldn't have believed it, but eye-witnesses say that you seemed quite uncomfortable, which seemed likely.'*

'Is that what they're saying?' he asks, flushing with warm embarrassment.

'Freddie Lounds described it as a kiss one would give their great aunt at his Bar Mitzvah, if I heard correctly.'

That startles a laugh out of him. To his delight, Hannibal laughs, too.

It's peaceful, here. The only ones in the parking lot are Hannibal and himself, save for a few birds. Like the break of day after a storm, though he's having trouble finding any debris.

'We should probably go back inside,' Will signs, though he doesn't want to.

Hannibal shakes his head, resting his temple on Will's shoulder. *'We have time before the bell rings. Let's stay out here for a while longer.'*

He's about to protest. He's already narrowly avoided getting detention twice today, he's not keen to try for a third.

But then Hannibal's fingers are threading with his own, their hands twined over Hannibal's thigh, and Will's strength leaks from his body. He looks down, observing the boy curled close

to him, and for the first time Will sees Hannibal Lecter as something as vulnerable as himself. Something fragile, small. Something he could break if he isn't careful.

He presses a kiss to Hannibal's sandy hair, squeezes his hand, and sits back to savor the quiet for a few more precious minutes.

Us Versus Them

Chapter Notes

I feel like I apologize for the wait on every chapter of this fic, but I'm doing it again! I'm sorry about the wait. But I hope yall like this update!!! It's mostly just an advancement of a few plot threads, because...

the next three chapters will be a story arc that I've been writing and rewriting for. nearly a year, actually. it was one of the first concepts that made me really excited to write this fic so I'm SO excited to share them with you. So yeah, enjoy this somewhat uneventful chapter because its the last one you'll get for a while!

Also, this chapter heavily references John Carpenter's 'The Thing', a horror film from 1982 starring Kurt Russell. The movie is avaliable to watch for free on the Internet Archive, I'd definitely recommend it if you haven't seen it and enjoy the tension and body horror in Hannibal!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'I rented another film on your list.'

He smiles. To Will, there is no greater sentiment. It weighs more than a kiss, sits more warmly between his ribs than a hundred 'i like you's. It's more than anyone's ever done for him by miles, in his eyes.

Hannibal Lecter has, in the gradual, subtle way that he does so many things, taught Will something new about himself. That affection, however deep or shallow, began with something shared. He'd spent long hours rhapsodizing about his own pet passions, and in turn Hannibal had shared his own fascinations, and the exchange brought them ever closer. Fostering a connection that never felt forced or condescending. Even when Hannibal didn't much care for things that Will shared, he still clearly cared that Will wanted to share them.

That was enough.

'Which one?'

Hannibal smiles back. *'The Thing.'*

Will brightens, setting his lunch aside to properly devote himself to the discussion. *'Tell me everything. Did you like it? It's okay if you didn't, but I really hope you did.'*

Oh, he knows that face. That's the face Hannibal makes when he wants to kiss Will. Will isn't entirely sure why the other boy is making that face *now* but he's always happy to see it. *'I did, don't worry.'*

He sits up straighter, nodding minutely, encouraging. Hannibal laughs, but Will knows that it isn't mocking when he does it.

'Where shall I start?'

'Anywhere. Everywhere. Were you scared?'

Another soft chuckle. Will doesn't notice that his hands are flapping until the button on the cuff of his flannel clacks against the tabletop. *'Never. But the suspense was very effective. I was so invested, at one point Uncle walked in and asked when the last time I'd blinked was.'*

And a giddy answering laugh bubbles out of Will. He feels ready to burst at his seams. *'You weren't grossed out or anything? The effects are... well, I know it's intense.'*

Hannibal narrows his eyes. Tilts his head. *'You're hedging,'* he observes, and Will blushes.

'I'm not, I'm just—'

'You are. You don't need to.'

Will huffs. *'I just know that it's weird, you know? I don't want you to think I'm a... a freak, or anything.'*

The other boy leans closer over the table, still looking at Will like he wants to kiss. *'I like it when you get excited, Will. You don't need to be so self-conscious. Not with me.'*

He chews his lip for a beat. His palms drum on the table, quick but soft.The other boy inclines his head, waiting. After another moment, Will sighs sharply.

'I could look at those monsters for hours and never run out of things to say about them,' he confesses. *'I watched that movie for the first time when I was twelve, and when I saw that first scene with the dog I had nightmares for weeks. Rob Bottin— um, the lead special effects artist— he's a visionary. He's ahead of his time, he changed horror forever. He's up there with like, H.R Giger on my list of heroes.'* Will pales somewhat. *'Sorry, was that... was that okay?'*

Hannibal looks pleased. *'I admire that you find beauty in the horrific, Will. Remind me to show you some selections from Francisco Goya's series of Black Paintings, soon— I think you'll enjoy them.'*

He nods eagerly, always ready to continue their seemingly endless exchange. Give and take, the way he thinks it's supposed to be. *'So, what did you think about the ending? Did you catch what really happened?'*

Hannibal tilts his head.

'Childs was the alien! MacReady tricks him into drinking gasoline, right at the end, and he doesn't even react.'

'Does he really?' Hannibal prods, and Will nods again. He feels like a balloon, swelling with excitement. Will wonders when he'll finally burst.

'It's so subtle, but once you know it you can see Kurt Russell reacting to it. Oh my god, we haven't even talked about Kurt Russell yet, wasn't he amazing?'

Hannibal chuckles, a sly smile rising to his face. *'Oh yes, he was. He's very handsome, too.'*

The frantic gears in his head grind to a stop so suddenly that Will almost thinks there must be smoke leaking from his ears. His loss of balance must be evident in his face, because Hannibal frowns.

'Well, you don't think so? I may just have a weakness for blue eyes.'

Hannibal makes a point of looking in Will's eyes, then, and Will comes crashing back to reality. Of course, the two of them can talk about this. Hannibal knows better than anyone, after all, how Will feels about men. There's no need to be self-conscious, not with Hannibal.

'He's... yes. God, yeah, he's really hot. And I'm not even usually into, um, guys with beards, so.'

Will is struck with the feeling, when Hannibal nods, that the two of them are engaging in something sacred. Their conversation forbidden by society at large, spoken in a language that disguises their words from their peers, like an ancient rite, only for people like himself. Just the two—

"Hey Will!"

He flinches at the sound, despite the fact that their conversation would have been nonsense to anyone else in the school. Alana Bloom is standing over his shoulder, Margot at her side. "You haven't been sitting with us," Alana notes.

Will glances toward their table. He's only looking for a moment or two, but as luck would have it Mason looks up at the same moment. He glares at Will from across the cafeteria, his glasses sitting across a nose that looks decidedly different from the one he'd had a few weeks ago. **'There aren't enough seats for both of us,'** he writes, which is true.

Margot smiles at him. He smiles back. Margot, the only other member of his and Hannibal's secret society. That he knows of, anyway. "Well, can we sit with you?" she asks.

He looks to Hannibal. The other boy seems somewhat shocked to be approached at all. Will spares one nervous glance Margot's way before he lifts his hands.

'You don't have to say yes.'

Hannibal licks his lips. Furrows his brows. Weighing his options. *'It's okay with me,'* he says at last.

'You're sure?'

Hannibal nods, but he doesn't seem too sure to Will. It doesn't matter, though, because as soon as he nods the girls take seats at the table.

"So," Margot says, flicking her hair behind her shoulder. "What are we talking about?"

Will's lip curls at the edge. **'Movies.'**

Alana starts speaking before he gets a chance to bring up *'The Thing'*.

"Oh, my god, speaking of— Margot, did you hear about what happened to Brian Zeller this weekend?"

That catches his attention. He usually doesn't care about gossip, but this happens to surround one of his friends.

"No, what?"

"He got caught sneaking into *'Basic Instinct'* with Beverly Katz."

Margot snorts. "That's so embarrassing."

Huh. Bev hadn't mentioned anything like that happening. Maybe she was just embarrassed about getting caught? He remembers what Brian had confessed, their first day back from Spring Break. About kissing Bev in her car. They hadn't been on a date, had they?

"It sucks, too, because I wanted to sneak into that movie. Now they're going to have their guards up."

Margot gives Alana a curious look. "You wanna see *'Basic Instinct'?"*

Alana shrugs. "Doesn't really matter now, either way."

"I bet we could still go," Margot says, smirking to herself. "Zeller probably only got caught because he creamed his jeans when he saw Sharon Stone."

"Yeah." Alana turns a bit sheepish, suddenly, looking at the chips in her orange nail polish.

"She's pretty though. Sharon Stone, I mean."

Will blinks. He looks at Hannibal, first. The other boy is doodling in his sketchbook, evidently disinterested in the new topic of conversation and content to be left out. He looks to Margot next, and she swallows.

"...Yeah," Margot says, and it's like she's speaking Will's language again. Not ASL, but another language they share. "Yeah, she's... beautiful."

-

"Do you wanna split a haystack today?" Will looks at Bev, both of them squinting as they pass through the exit and into the afternoon sun. "I want one but I don't think I can finish it."

'I can't today, remember?' He signs, but Bev isn't looking.

"We're probably going to have to wait for Brian and Jimmy for a bit— I can show you my new CD."

As they approach her car, Will sees Hannibal, leaning against the door of his own car. He looks like something from a dream, as far as Will's concerned, his sandy hair catching the sun almost angelically.

'I really need to go, Bev—'

"Since you're my only friend with *taste,* I'm sure you'll appreciate it."

She's startled when Will whistles to catch her full attention, frowning at him through the glare. "What?"

He makes a show out of signing slowly, deliberately. Maybe it's condescending, but nothing frustrates him more than being ignored. *'I. Can't. Hang. Out.'*

Her brows furrow. "Why not? We always hang out on Thursdays."

Will's eyes flick again toward Hannibal. Hannibal is looking back. Bev follows his gaze and huffs. "Seriously? You're ditching me to hang out with Lecter?"

'I'm not ditching you. I told you yesterday that I had other plans, you just didn't listen to me.'

She chews her cheek. "...He could come with us," she offers after a long moment. "If you wanted him to."

There's a hesitancy in her tone that grates him. Is it such a hard thing, to include someone? Bev had included Will, hadn't she? It makes him feel even less guilty about his plans than before, and he hadn't felt too guilty to begin with.

'We're busy,' he tells her, and her frown turns to a scowl.

"Fine," she snaps. "Fine, whatever. Go have fun with Lecter."

He rolls his eyes. *'Bev, come on.'*

"I said its fine!"

It's not fine. It could not be more glaringly evident that it isn't fine. He's on thin ice with her, he knows that. Has been since the day Hannibal kissed him. It's like she can tell, somehow. Knows to be suspicious of him because his disguise is imperfect.

Will always looked up to MacReady, wanted to be so capable and commanding. Once again, he is met with the harsh reality of being the creature. The Thing. Frankenstein's Monster can't walk among humans, it doesn't matter if he becomes civilized or intelligent or compassionate. He can't hide what he is, any better than Will can.

What will he do, when no one trusts anyone anymore?

Will can't say any of this to Bev, though. He doubts she would understand even if he did tell her. So instead he turns, and stalks across the parking lot. He feels better with every step he takes, but there's still a stone sitting heavy in his gut when he opens the passenger door of Hannibal's car.

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Being in Hannibal's room feels like being in another world.

He can't remember the last time he'd been invited to someone else's house, but he still hadn't thought much of it when Hannibal asked him to come over. That might not be entirely honest — he'd thought of *one* thing, almost obsessively. That Hannibal's uncle wouldn't be home for hours, and that Hannibal made a point of telling him that. It made Will nervous. Excited. Awkward.

Hannibal's bedroom is on the second floor of his house, which Will had found out during his last visit. The same window he'd chucked pebbles at in the middle of the night was letting afternoon sunlight pour over the faded fabric of his blue jeans. They're together, on Hannibal's bed, the other boy's hands tangled in his hair. Hannibal has a record player in his room, he'd led Will upstairs under the guise that the two of them would be listening to an album. They are, in the most technical sense. The vinyl is certainly *playing,* but Will couldn't have hummed a single measure.

Will is half-sprawled on top of Hannibal, leg thrown clumsily over the other boy's thigh. He's braced on one palm, the other grasping fistfuls of Hannibal's shirt. He shivers when Hannibal's nose nuzzles at his neck, his lips skimming over Will's rushing pulse. Will tips his head back, eyes closed, and sighs.

Will has never known himself the way he knows himself when he's with Hannibal. Never felt more sure of himself, of what he wanted. Never felt less like a monster— not because he *isn't* monstrous, but because Hannibal seems to like monsters. He looks at Will, his waxy skin and broken bones, and holds his twisted skull between his hands.

'I want to tell you something,' Will signs, still gasping for air as he pulls himself away.

Hannibal stares up at him, eyes wide and dark and endless. *'Anything.'*

Will bites his lip. Hannibal stares. He lifts his hands, tells them to move, to answer. They don't.

'...I made something for you,' he says instead when his nerves get the best of him. *'Do you want to see it?'*

Hannibal doesn't really look like he believes that's what Will wanted to say, but he nods, grinning.

Will clambers out of his lap, blushing now at the tightness in his jeans even though he'd felt something similar pressed to his hip just moments ago. It's an awkward sort of limbo, navigating their relationship. So many things, both physical and emotional— they feel more

natural than anything in the moment, but when that moment ends Will is left feeling insecure. He tries to push these worries aside, rooting through his discarded backpack for his binder.

He can feel Hannibal watching him intently as he moves, anticipating the reveal of Will's gift. Will takes a deep breath when he finds what he's looking for, fingers closing a little too tightly and crumpling the sheet when he shoves it in Hannibal's direction.

Hannibal blinks at the sheet, taking it gingerly from Will's shaking hand. Will wants to sink to the center of the earth as he waits for Hannibal to read the scrawled lines.

You should be running.

The eyes pinned you in place, they'll say
fear giving you legs like stone

you know it by name, this creature in the wood

but your heart is steady, lamb.

you stand before the Beast,
the moon at your back
in its domain

no one can save you here

but your heart is steady, lamb.

it doesn't blink
it can't
neither do you

the only sound is heavy breathing. its. yours.

heavy, but your heart is steady, lamb.

you can't stand here all night, lamb.
one of you must move eventually.
you might flee. the beast may chase you.

the one who moves first will have the better chance

my heart is pounding, lamb.

slowly, like a kiss, you fall to your knees
obsessively, it circles you
afraid of what it cannot understand

it paces, never leaving you, until its paws leave bloody tracks

my heart is aching, lamb.

the moon is low when the Beast falls
collapsed at your feet
you have bested it. Victorius

the killing blow is yours to make. it is Waiting.

my heart is open, Lamb.

Will doesn't notice for a minute that his hands are trembling. He curls them into tight fists over the knees of his jeans, releases them, curls them again. He can't bear to look up. He feels like if he ever looks at Hannibal again he'll turn to dust. He hears shuffling , movement, but he can't look.

It's the sound of pen scratching on paper that draws his attention at last, and when Will looks over he sees that Hannibal is writing in his own journal. Looking at Will's poem and then back at the page. Copying down the words.

'What are you doing?'

Hannibal looks a bit bashful when he sees Will's confusion. *'I hope this is okay,'* he signs. *'I wouldn't want to take your copy, but I want to have it with me.'*

Will's face grows impossibly hotter. *'You want to keep it?!'*

And then Hannibal is making that face again. That I-want-to-kiss-you face. *'Of course I do. It's beautiful Will, I feel honored that you've shared this with me. I'd like to keep it a copy of my own, and hold it close.'*

Will's heart flies to his mouth. He'd barely dared to hope that Hannibal would *like* the poem, now he wants to keep it?

'If that's alright with you, that is.'

He swallows. Forces himself to stop gaping like a fish. *'You can have it. You can have my copy, if you want it.'*

Hannibal isn't good at disguising how much he likes that idea, but he tries to play cool. Will finds it adorable. *'I couldn't take it from you, it's your work.'*

Will bites his lip. *'Well, I could always... take your copy. The one in your handwriting.'*

The other boy's eyes go wide, and he quickly returns to his task of transcribing the poem. His handwriting is nicer than Will's, and Will feels a giddy rush in his chest when Hannibal tears it free from the journal and places it in his hands. Will tucks it in his binder, smoothing it out with a smile.

Hannibal kisses him, soft and lingering enough to make Will feel like he could float away.

'You have a head for the arts, Will,' Hannibal says, then kisses him again. *'So smart.'* Another kiss, and Will's never been drunk but it can't be too different from this. *'What other skills are*

you hiding?'

The teeth on his lip makes him wonder if that question was meant to be a proposition, but he panicks and pulls away to say

'I can play the guitar.'

Hannibal lights up. Will's never, ever getting sick of that smile. *'Can you, really?'*

Will nods, and Hannibal's hands are moving eagerly.

I can't believe my luck. I've found a Renaissance man,' he chuckles brightly. *'My mother would be so pleased.'*

Will freezes, his smile falling in seconds. Hannibal falters at the sight of it.

'...You really think so?'

Hannibal takes his hand, presses a kiss to his knuckles. *'Wholeheartedly, Will. You'll play something for me soon, won't you? Bring your guitar to our next date, I'd love to hear you play.'*

Will tries to drag himself back to reality, to make himself nod and agree and show Hannibal how excited he'd be to do just that. Instead the only thing on his mind is how moved he is by the thought of Hannibal's mother *approving* of him. Of this woman, whom Hannibal never speaks about but clearly loved with everything he had, thinking that Will was good enough. Good enough for Hannibal, good enough to sit at her dining room table with the rest of the Lecter family and be trusted with her son's heart. He feels a pang of sorrow, reverberating in his bones like he'd been struck by a tuning fork. A keen sense of loss, of loneliness— not just for Hannibal but for himself.

The record has gone silent, and Hannibal stands to flip it onto its B Side. As he does, he gently sets Will's poem on his bedside table, smiling down at the page. Will smiles, too, thinking to himself that his handwriting doesn't actually looks so out of place in the other boy's room.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe the dumbest disclaimer on any fic ever but I just wanna clarify because I'm a NERD:

Will's interpretation of the ending of 'The Thing' is a very popular fan theory, and has been for decades, but Kurt Russell has stated in interviews that this was not the intended message of the ending (in fact it kind of undermines the entire point of the film)... but Will wouldn't know that because its 1992 and reddit doesn't exist yet lmao

anyway ill see yall soon hopefully with another chapter! I'll go ahead and warn you that chapter 21 is going to be pretty intense, so be sure you're prepared for that! Much Love, SW <3

Downpour

Chapter Notes

big TW on this chapter For Parental Abuse— verbal, emotional, and physical. If you're following along with this story but you're sensitive to these topics, stop reading after the first scene break! a brief description of the rest of the chapter's events will be in the Endnotes for those who want to check for any specific triggers before proceeding.

This is a heavy one, but believe it or not chapters 22 and 23 are something I've been looking forward to writing for nearly a year now! So yeah, sorry that this chapter isn't super fluffy and fun but without giving anything away, there is catharsis on the horizon <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most of Hannibal's favorite poems these days, Will has come to realize, are about finding beauty in the mundane. Moving through the motions of daily life, one step at a time, and being indescribably grateful for every moment. He seems infatuated with the effortless perfection of a good day. There's nothing extraordinary to be found in the world he's been romanticizing— The love stories Hannibal fixates on concern themselves less with moving the sky for one another, and more with just lying back and watching the clouds pass by. For most of his life, those things would have seemed equally unattainable to Will.

Today, though.

Today Will woke up early, and slipped out the front door before his father had even rolled out of bed. Today Hannibal picked him up at a stop sign two streets away from where Will lives, at their usual spot. Today he and Hannibal spent the day at the shopping mall, and ate bad food court Chinese food, and browsed through store after store together.

It was good. It wasn't life-changing, it wouldn't be a day that he remembered when he was old and grey. It was just... good.

And in Will's opinion, good was more than enough.

Hannibal is parked on the side of the road near the same stop sign, both of them delaying their inevitable parting for every second they can. It had started raining while they'd been at the mall, and it shows no signs of stopping any time soon. Will sits back in Hannibal's passenger's seat, holding the other boy's hand as he listens to the rain. He needs to go now, they both know that. It doesn't make him any more willing to get out of the car, though. Doesn't make Hannibal any more willing to say goodbye.

After a few silent minutes, Hannibal gently pulls away to speak.

'Are you sure you'll be alright walking in the rain? I wouldn't mind dropping you off somewhere closer.'

Will shakes his head, hoping that the dread he feels at the idea isn't obvious. He's aware, at least on some level, that their relationship is completely at odds with his reality. Every foot between Hannibal Lecter and Will's actual life is precious, he's not giving them up.

'It's just water, Han. I'll be fine.'

Hannibal only sighs. He doesn't press, he never does, but Will can feel his patience wearing thin. It's something he's been feeling on a lot of people, lately. Bev, his father, now Hannibal. Something would have to give, sooner or later.

It won't be Hannibal.

'But thank you, for offering. That's sweet,'

That seems to placate him, for the moment. He flashes a shy smile. *'I got you a present, you know,'* Hannibal signs, and Will feels his cheeks turn pink. *'As a thank-you for the poem you wrote for me.'*

Will huffs, rolling his eyes even though he's blushing fiercely. *'You make me lunch like five times a week, you didn't need to get me anything.'*

'Just take it. Please?'

As if there was ever a chance of Will saying no. As soon as he nods, Hannibal reaches into the back seat and plucks a bag from the floorboard.

Will lifts a brow, eyeing the bag. *'When did you have time to get this? Did you go to a store while I was in the bathroom?'*

Hannibal shakes his head. He looks overwhelmingly pleased with himself. *'I bought it a few days ago, actually, I just haven't found the right moment to bring it up.'*

Will's heart stops when he pulls the box from the shopping bag.

'Do you like it?' Hannibal prods when Will doesn't immediately react. *'I hope you don't mind my selecting the model on my own— the clerk at the electronics store said that this was the very best portable tape player they had in stock, though, and the headphones were included.'*

Will's stomach turns. His hands are trembling where they grip the box.

'When Mason broke your last one, I was livid. I still think that he should have been made to replace it, but if he won't then I will.'

He turns the package over in his hands. There's no price on it, thank God. Will can imagine, though.

'...You don't like it.'

Will blinks, taking in the dejected look on his boyfriend's face. *'No, it's not that! It's just... well, you know that I can't just take this, right?'*

Hannibal genuinely doesn't seem to understand. *'I got it for you, Will, why shouldn't you take it?'*

'I don't know, I just shouldn't,' he frowns at the gift in his lap. *'It makes me feel guilty, I guess.'*

His face flushes from shame rather than affection when Hannibal laughs. *'Will, I've already told you a dozen times that I only do these things because I care for you. You needn't feel guilty.'*

He's only becoming more frustrated, but he nods. He knows that Hannibal means well, but he still doesn't like the way it makes him feel. Selfish, like he's taking advantage of Hannibal's kindness.

'You're my boyfriend, aren't you?' Hannibal prods, and Will softens. *'Why shouldn't I enjoy giving you gifts?'*

Will looks Hannibal in the eyes, and finds that he's weaker than ever for the light that greets him there. He musters a smile. *'Thank you,'* he signs at last. *'I do like it. I've missed having a tape player, and this one is really... nice. I appreciate the gesture. I do.'*

Hannibal preens at that, nearly feline, but Will doesn't break.

'But please don't buy me anything else, okay?'

The other boy is immediately pouting, and Will is caught between annoyance and adoration. *'But I—'*

'I'm serious, Han. Please.'

That sigh makes another appearance, like Will is presenting him with a terrible inconvenience, but Hannibal nods regardless.

Will smiles, a real one this time, and Hannibal can't seem to stop himself from returning the gesture. He looks up and down the street, then darts in and kisses Hannibal quickly.

Hannibal laughs again. It lies sweeter on Will's nerves than before. *'Go on, then,'* the other boy signs with a grin, and Will shoves his gift into his backpack before stepping out into the rain.

-

Will could listen to the rain forever. It's been picking up all evening, wrapping him in the gentle soundscape like a thick blanket and making him sleepy. He's sitting by the window, listening to the distant roll of thunder as he waits for their spaghetti to boil. His father is on the phone with a client, trying like hell to explain that no, they can't work on anything if it's still storming tomorrow. Will is firmly within his thoughts, though.

In his mind, he and Hannibal are curled up on a couch together, somewhere warm and quiet. They're listening to the rain together, and Hannibal is stroking Will's curls the way he likes, and nothing can touch them.

"Yeah... yeah, sure, I can call you back. Here, let me make sure I've got your number..." His dad fumbles for a pen for a moment before cursing to himself and moving to grab Will's backpack.

If Will had been thinking, he might have rushed to fetch something for him before his dad could get a hand on his pencil case. If he'd been thinking, he might have been able to smoothly reorient this moment in his favor. But he isn't thinking. He doesn't start thinking until he hears the zipper on the pencil case open.

Will freezes on the spot. He feels the color drain from his face. He counts the seconds, like counting miles between himself and a lightning strike.

"...Alright," his dad says, horribly slow. "Hey, listen, I'm gonna have to go, yeah? I'll call you back in the morning."

His blood turns cold on instinct. Something primal in him saying 'Maybe if you don't move, it won't see you'.

He almost flinches when his dad laughs into the phone. "Okay, talk to you then. Sure."

There is a nauseating silence between his father hanging up and finally speaking again. A handful of seconds that feels like forever. The calm before the storm.

"...Willy?"

Will makes a fist over the knee of his jeans. His father's voice is unnaturally even. Threatening in its calm, like a frozen lake.

"You wanna tell me why you've got ten bucks stashed in your pencil case, son?"

Will doesn't answer. He doesn't trust himself to speak without his hands shaking.

When his dad turns to face him, he has two five-dollar bills clutched between his fingers. His voice might be calm, but the look on his face has every alarm in Will's brain going off at once.

"I asked you a question. I want to know where you got this money."

The only thing he can think to say is *'It's not what it looks like.'*

"It better not be," he counters, his steps booming in Will's skull as he comes closer, closer. "Because it looks like you've been stealing from me."

Will shakes his head, trying to keep from turning frantic. *'I didn't steal it. I wouldn't do that.'* Not when he knew what the consequences of something like that would be.

"Then where did you fucking *get* it?!"

The volume of his father's voice is climbing. Will's stomach heaves. Panicking, he blurts *'You gave it to me!'*

The older man tilts his head, visibly unimpressed. "I *gave* it to you. That's the answer you're going with?"

Will chews the inside of his lip. *'It's the truth.'*

His dad's hand slams on the wood of the small table, leaving the wadded-up money there. He grabs Will's pencil case, upends it and lets its contents clatter to the floor.

He grabs the backpack next, and Will nearly jumps to his feet. *'It's true!'* he insists, panic spiking as he watches his backpack sway slightly in his father's hold. Please, please, *please. 'I didn't steal it, you gave me that money, I swear.'*

His dad narrows his eyes. "When did I give it to you?"

Will winces. *'It was for lunch money,'* he confesses, and it stings to send his only source of income up the river. But what choice does he have? *'I was just... saving it, that's all. I never stole anything.'*

The look that the older man gives him makes Will want to curl into a ball. "You pocketed the money that I gave to you so that you could eat, and kept it for yourself? And you don't think that's stealing?!" He sets his jaw, shakes the backpack in his hands. "How long has this been going on, huh? How much money have you taken from me?!"

Will shuts his eyes when his father empties the bag. He can't look. He'll cry if he looks.

"What the fuck is *this?!"*

Fuck, he never even got a chance to open it. *'I didn't buy that!'*

"Oh, I know *you* didn't buy it, Willy. Either you stole it from the store, or I bought it with *my* fucking money! Now you tell me which one it was!"

He opens his eyes when he hears another loud thud. His new tape player, thrown onto the table beside his money. Sitting pretty in its case, an innocent bystander caught in the crossfire.

'It was a gift,' Will signs, as quickly as he can with his hands trembling as they are. *'It was a gift, I promise I didn't buy it—'*

"You're a fucking **liar!"**

Will's breath is knocked from his lungs when his father slams him into the wall, the impact sending pain shooting up his shoulder.

"You're a liar, and a thief, and you don't even have the balls to own up to it!"

When he remembers how to make his lungs work, his breaths come fast and shallow. He's about to start hyperventilating. No, no, he can't have a meltdown right now, it's not *safe.*

His dad crouches to sift through the pile on the floor. Will feels powerless to do anything but watch. Watch, and wait for the end.

It's a fresh blow to the gut when he sees it. His math textbook had fallen spine-up, its pages sprawled awkwardly over the floor. The fall must have dislodged the fifteen dollars tucked inside. Something Will was saving for a rainy day. Again, the money gets plucked from the pile and tossed onto the table.

"God," his father hisses, his voice dripping with disgust. "You've been doing this for months, haven't you? You little rat." He rubs his face, not even looking at Will anymore. "Give me your wallet."

Will blinks. *'There's nothing in it—'*

"I said give me your fucking wallet, boy!"

He pulls it from his jeans, fumbling as he holds it out. His father doesn't rifle through it, doesn't check to see if it's empty or not. He just throws it onto the table with everything else. A slowly growing collection of everything Will has.

"Show me the rest."

He's stunned into silence for half a breath before he signs *'That's everything.'*

"Stop *lying* to me, Willy!"

'That's all I have!'

Will hisses when the other man grabs him by the shoulder, the bruise forming there tender enough to make him freeze in place.

"Listen to me," he says, slowly. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way, but we're doing this one way or another— do you understand me? You can either show me where the rest of *my* God damned money is, or you can wait until I find it myself and we'll see what kind of mood I'm in after you wasted my fucking time. It's up to you."

Will sighs. Tries to think despite the jumble of his thoughts. There's a chance, he thinks, that his father won't find the rest. That he'll look until he runs out of steam, until he really believes that there's nothing left. If he does, then Will could keep his security, could still have *something.* It's a very appealing idea.

But it's only that. An idea. Meanwhile there is an even greater chance, at least in Will's eyes, that his dad would root through his things all night if that's what it took. He would rifle through Will's poems, his journals, everything he has. He'd find what he was after, eventually, and by the time he did he would be furious. Will can't begin to predict what would happen next, but he knows that it would be devastating.

Maybe it makes him weak. Maybe someone with stronger resolve would hold their tongue, would fight until the last moment. For Will, though, the choice almost made itself.

That doesn't make it any easier.

Every step toward his clothes is agonizing. Another reminder that he is *choosing* to let this happen. He sinks to his knees, his shaking hand reaching out to pick up one bundled pair of socks near the back.

For a fleeting moment, he looks at the door. He considers grabbing the only meaningful piece of his stash left and making a break for it. He wouldn't get far. His father is between himself and the door, though, and Will can barely walk at the moment, let alone fight. Still, it's a nice fantasy.

His eyes are fixed on the floor when he holds the socks up, flinching when they're snatched from his hand.

Will chokes on a sob when they're unfolded, their contents fluttering to the floor with an almost insulting softness. Fifty dollars in fives, carefully stashed and saved. For an emergency, Will had always said to himself. For if he ever needed to buy a bus ticket, bolt in the night and put as many miles as possible between himself and his dad.

He'd been so *careful* with it. Always insistent on only spending a little at a time, to make every cent last. It feels like a waste, now.

Both of them are motionless for a moment. Taking in the destruction of the past few minutes as the rain continues to pour outside. This, Will thinks, is the view from the eye of a hurricane. Miles gone, knowing that there are miles to go. All he can think to do is brace himself for the next storm.

His father's gaze shifts, from the money on the ground to Will. The very next moment Will is being brought to his feet by a savage grip on his forearm, so rough that Will yelps.

"You selfish, greedy little liar!" The other man snarls, and Will bites his lip to keep it from wobbling. "I give you clothes, food, a roof over your head— and all you can do is *take!"* He shakes Will by his arm, and Will struggles against his grip. "You only ever think about yourself. I give you so much and you just want more, I'm fucking sick of it!"

Will stumbles backwards when he's shoved in the direction of the door, struggling to find balance.

"Get out."

He's too stunned to do more than blink for a moment.

"I said get out! I'm not letting a fucking thief sleep here, get the hell out."

It isn't the first time his father has threatened to kick him out, but it is the most serious he's ever sounded about it. Ordinarily when this card gets played, Will begs. He puts his tail

between his legs, begs for his dad not to throw him out on the street. Will wonders if he's expecting that to happen, this time.

The sound of the storm outside is almost encouraging when Will wrenches the door open, the wind and wet whipping at his face almost righteously. It feels like a clap of thunder when he slams the door behind himself. He sets his jaw, fighting the threat of a total breakdown as he sets off up the street.

With nothing left but the clothes on his back, alone in the dark without even his pride as company, Will puts his head down and moves North.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter description: Will's dad finds the money that Will's been gradually storing away. As more and more of Will's money (and the new cassette player given to him by hannibal) are revealed, his father becomes increasingly angry and violent, calling will selfish, dishonest, and a thief, as well as repeatedly shoving / shaking him. It culminates with Will being kicked out of their apartment, and Will leaves with a new destination in mind.

Safe Haven

Chapter Notes

> okay so I know I SAID that chapter 23 would be the last chapter of this arc but things change okay so the last chapter of this arc will now by chapter 24 because I can't resist really luxuriating in this space hope that's okay lmao

By the time his hands are within reach of the door, with its cheerful red paint and the delicate filigree on the handle, Will feels like collapsing on the front stoop. His entire body hurts— his feet are aching from walking all the way across town, and his back is numb from being beaten by constant rainfall, and his teeth hurt from clenching his jaw the entire way. It's enough to make him want to just curl up on the doorstep, sleep in the driest spot he can find and leave himself to be found in the morning.

He knocks three times, lets out a shuddering sigh, waits.

Will has been burdened with a growing feeling, lately, that he is approaching a precipice. A point of no return, a mistake he can't come back from. The tension of that approach leaves his bones sore, stiff with dread for the eventual drop. The last wrong step he'll ever take, the one that sends him finally plummeting over the edge.

For a horrible, blinding moment, as the front door creaks uncertainly open and drowns him in light, Will is seized by the feeling that this is that step. That in seconds, he'll be cast to the sea and never seen again.

He squints through the tiny crack in the door, blinking into the golden glow. Delirious with anxiety and desperation, he almost wonders if he's dying right now. If this is the fabled light that he shouldn't go into.

The man inside blinks at Will, looking him up and down with a confusion that only deepens with every passing second. He's old, older than Will's father— with a head of thin ashen hair and immaculate posture.

"Hello," he says slowly, his voice carrying an accent that Will can't quite place. He peers into the dark past Will's shoulder, as if checking to see that the boy is alone. "Is there... something I can help you with?"

Will's heart feels liable to break one of his ribs. It almost hurts to breathe. He can barely sign, his hands are shaking so violently. *'I'm sorry,'* he blurts, his mind foggy with distress. *'I know it's late, but I— I didn't know where else to go, and I can't... I can't go home, and I was just hoping—'* he shuts his eyes tight. Tires to breathe. *'I'm a... friend, of your nephew's, and—'*

The sound of the door creaking further ajar makes Will's eyes snap open, and he looks Robertus properly in the face for the first time. Dark brown eyes. Runs in the family, he reckons, but it does wonders for his brewing panic attack.

"Oh," he breathes, pity saturating his tone. "My, you're soaked to the bone. Poor thing, come inside."

Will's hands are restless as he steps through the Lecters' threshold, repetitive and jittering. *'Thank you, thank you, thank you'.*

Robertus locks the door behind Will, looking back towards the rest of the house. "Hannibal!" the older man calls out, taking stock of Will as he does. He looks Will in the face, voice softening as he speaks. "Lets begin with the most pressing matter, shall we? Are you hurt? Do you need to be taken to the hospital?"

Still wide eyed and frightened, Will quickly shakes his head. His rain-drenched curls stick to his face, the sensation deeply unpleasant, and he winces.

The older man looks relieved at that. "Good. Are you in any immediate danger?"

Water drips from his wrists when he lifts them, catching the light overhead. *'I just need a place to sleep,'* he answers, then quickly adds *'Just for tonight. I promise I won't cause any trouble. You won't even know I'm here, really. Please.'*

Robertus huffs in slight irritation, and for a moment Will almost moves to leave. Then the man mutters "What on Earth is keeping that boy?" to himself and turns his head again. "Hannibal!"

Will starts when he hears another knock, from deep within the house. Robertus nods to himself. "Come to the foyer, please, and bring a few clean towels!"

Another singular knock, and then Robertus is returning his attention. At his request for towels, Will suddenly realizes that he's made a mess of the man's entryway. Rainwater drips from his body, adding to the growing puddle at his feet. When Will signs another apology, Robertus only shakes his head.

"Don't worry about that, please," he insists. "It won't take more than a moment to clean. Go on and take off your socks and shoes— I'll have Hannibal fetch some dry clothes for you, and runs these through the wash."

Will nods, kneeling to comply. Robertus keeps talking, but Will can barely cling to what's being said. He's still reeling from the fact that he's *actually* been accepted inside. Hannibal has told Will before that his uncle was a good man, generous enough to take Hannibal in despite never having children of his own, but Will still hadn't dared to dream that such generosity would extend to himself.

"We have a guest bedroom down the hall, I'll prepare it for you. The mattress is a bit firm, but it is warm and dry, so I trust you'll find it better than the apparent alternative. If you'd like to

take a warm shower before settling in, that's perfectly alright, as well. You won't inconvenience either of us, I assure you."

When he rises to his feet again, now barefoot, Robertus smiles at him.

"You're Will, aren't you?"

Will swallows, unsuccessfully trying to wipe away the heat that leaps to his face. He nods.

His smile only grows, and he leans a bit closer, as if sharing a secret. "I've heard quite a lot about you."

A stab of terror shoots up Will's entire body, but Robertus seems completely unbothered. "Enough to guess who you were when you began signing to me, at any rate," he elaborates. Of course, Will thinks. Robertus is being so kind because Hannibal has already told him that the two of them were friends. He isn't just opening his door to some teenaged stranger shivering on his doorstep.

Will wonders if he would, though.

He frees Will from the growing tension in his chest a moment later by changing subjects entirely. "Are you hungry, Will?"

He is. Starving, even. He hasn't eaten since he and Hannibal stopped at the food court earlier that afternoon. Fuck, was that really today? How had everything gone so wrong, so fast?

No amount of hunger could make Will stupid, though. He isn't going to take anything more from Hannibals uncle, his first impression has already been bad enough. He shakes his head.

The older man's mouth twists, and that, too, looks very familiar. Will's beginning to put together that many of Hannibal's... quirks might also be familial traits. "Alright," he says at last. "But if you change your mind, please let me know. Hannibal made a pot roast this evening, it wouldn't be any trouble at all to— ah, there you are."

Will's mouth turns dry when he sees him. Standing in the archway that leads into the living room, hair hanging loose and soft in his face and dressed in comfortable looking pajamas. It can't have been more than a handful of hours since they'd seen each other, and yet Will feels like he's been dying to see his face. Maybe he has.

It takes perhaps half a second of looking at Will for Hannibal to drop the fluffy towels he'd been holding to the floor and rush to Will's side. He doesn't even get a chance to meet him in the middle, though, because Will *runs* to him. He throws himself at Hannibal the moment he's within reach, the feeling of *yes, thank God* making him dizzy as the other boy folds his arms vice tight around his back. Will does the same, clutching at Hannibal in a clinging embrace. One of Hannibal's hands rises to card soothing fingers into Will's wet hair.

Something inside of Will breaks.

Will, as a rule, does not cry. Very rarely when alone and *never* in front of anyone. Crying makes you look weak, soft, shameful. Crying only makes it worse— only makes the thing

hurting you scream louder, burn hotter, hit harder. No one wins.

And yet, standing there wrapped in Hannibal's strong, gentle arms, Will finally falls to pieces. It's violent and it's ugly, his red face hiding itself against Hannibal's shoulder as sob after wrecked, misshapen sob leaves his ordinarily silent lips. He looses any sense of how long he's there, of how many minutes he spends burying his pathetic sounds in Hannibal's flesh. His body heaves with it, his chest fighting for air until his breaths are hitching, uneven gasps.

He feels Hannibal nod over Will's shoulder, some non-verbal exchange occurring between the boy and his uncle, and he hears footsteps leave the entryway. He and Hannibal are alone. Hannibal pets his hair.

"Shhh..."

Will's hands curl tighter into Hannibal's shirt, making desperate fists near his shoulder blades. Hannibal shushes him again. Loving, not disdainful. The chest pressed to Will's own rises and falls with a purposeful, even breath. Will tries his best to match it, breaking again partway though with another raw cry.

Hannibal kisses his head, Will's shoulders shake. They both take another breath, nearly synchronous. Will forces his hands to unfurl, the joints in his fingers aching. Hannibal rubs circles into Will's back, they take another breath.

Will feels heavy as the tension leaks from his body. It takes effort to keep from going limp and collapsing into the other boy's hold. The feeling washing over him is overwhelming. Foreign, so foreign that it takes an embarrassingly long time for Will to place it.

Relief. Real, true relief, so potent that it turns his legs to jelly and his skull to a fifty pound weight. Will takes a deep, satisfying breath. The first proper breath he's taken in hours, if not years.

Gently, making it abundantly clear that it's not a rejection, Hannibal coaxes Will backwards. He takes Will's face in his hands, wipes at his damp face with the pads of his thumbs. Will feels more raw than he can even remember feeling, like his skin has been peeled off and left to soak.

'...It's your Father, isn't it?'

Will shuts his eyes, almost sick. Scrubbing a hand down his face, he steps further back, out of Hannibal's reach. He shakes his head emphatically.

When Will looks at him again, Hannibal seems confused. *'No? What happened, then?'*

Will is shaking his head again, his mind screaming for a reprieve. *'Too much,'* he manages after a moment. *'Too much.'*

Hannibal is still wearing that blend of confusion and concern for a beat, and then he blinks, his eyes turning wide. *'I'm sorry,'* he replies, and some of Will's relief returns. *'Of course, we*

don't have to discuss it right now. Forgive me, that was... rude.' Hannibal seems surprised with himself as he says it. Slowly, he reaches out again, and Will allows it.

He tucks a wet strand of hair behind Will's ear with a soft smile, then moves to retrieve the discarded towels from where they'd fallen. He hands one of them to Will. *'Perhaps a hot shower will ease your nerves? You'll feel better when you're warm and clean.'*

Will hadn't planned taking that offer when Robertus extended it, but he's suddenly desperate for a bit of space and silence. He nods gratefully, letting Hannibal lead him to the bathroom.

His wet clothes are gone when he steps out of the shower, replaced by a neatly folded stack of dry pajamas. His neck turns hot at the thought of Hannibal slipping in and out of the bathroom without him noticing to swap his clothes, though he trusts that Hannibal wouldn't have spied on Will in the shower. Hannibal must've had the clothes he laid out for a while, because they fit fairly well on Will's slight frame. Better than some of his own clothes, really.

When he steps out, feeling much closer to calm than before, he creeps awkwardly through the empty hallway. He eventually finds Hannibal and Robertus, apparently having a hushed but heated conversation in the dining room. Hannibal is signing, obviously angry. They haven't noticed Will yet, and he stops shy of the threshold. Watching. It's rude to eavesdrop, he knows, but he can't stop himself when he sees the impassioned look on his boyfriend's face. It makes his stomach turn with anxiety and guilt, terrified that he's become the source of conflict between the two.

'...go back to that house, Uncle, I don't care what he says!' Hannibal is signing, and Robertus sighs.

"You need to calm down, Hannibal," he says in a low tone, and Hannibal doesn't seem to care.

*'It isn't **safe!** I know it isn't! You can't—'*

Hannibal's hands drop when Will steps into the dining room, only freezing for a moment before adopting his usual disposition. It's eerie, seeing how quickly Hannibal can put away his emotions. Anger getting pulled back in an instant, just like it had with Mason. Like a switch going off.

'Will,' he greets, and he makes no secret of drinking in the sight of Will in his clothes. Will blushes, remembering how captivated he'd been by the sight of Hannibal in his own shirt. He knows exactly what the other boy is feeling right now. *'Are you feeling any better?'*

Sheepishly, he nods. Both Lecters look pleased by that, at least, their argument put aside for the sake of their guest. Hannibal gestures to the table. *'Sit down, I'll make you something to eat.'*

"He said that he wasn't hungry," Robertus tells Hannibal, and there's a weariness in his voice. Like Hannibal is testing his patience.

Hannibal looks to his uncle, then to Will. He rolls his eyes. *'You're having dinner, Will,'* He says, and he makes a point out of it not being a question.

Hes still on edge from his glimpse of their argument, but the comment is so classically 'Hannibal' that it makes Will laugh. Hannibal's eyes immediately lock onto Will's face. There's something... new, there. Or maybe it's been there for a while and Will hasn't wanted to admit it.

Something that makes his chest go tight and his mind turn blank. Something that makes him feel dangerously closing to saying the words that have been on the tips of his fingers for weeks now. Not tonight, he's been through enough tonight.

Maybe he says it to himself, though. In his head, where Hannibal won't hear it.

When Hannibal moves to the kitchen, Robetus catches his attention. Will is worried that he's about to be given some sort of threat or warning when the older man begins to sign to him.

'My nephew can be... overbearing,' he says, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Hannibal is occupied with his new task. *'I might not know exactly what you've been through tonight— and I won't ask you to tell me if you aren't comfortable — but I can see that you are tired. If he is doing more harm than good, only say the word and I'll send him to bed.'*

Will takes a seat at their dining table, risking an awkward smile at him. *'I don't think he'd listen if you did,'* Will replies, and Robertus chuckles. *'I don't mind, either way.'*

Robertus nods. *'He means well, of course. He just has a tendency to fuss over people.'* His face falls. *'Ever since his family passed, anyway. Poor boy, he can't help himself.'*

His heart twists. A fresh sharp stab of guilt shoots to his stomach. *'I'm sorry.'*

'You have nothing to apologize for,' Robertus insists. *'In fact, I believe this is the least I could do for you, considering how much you've done for my family.'*

Will blinks, his brows furrowing. In response, Robertus nods in the direction of the kitchen.

'This Spring is the first time I've seen Hannibal happy since his mother was still alive. That is worth more to me than any amount of water damage in my foyer.'

Before he can reply, Robertus speaks aloud, calling into the kitchen. Which is a relief, because Will has no idea what to say. "Hannibal, I'm going to bed. Please show Will the guest room and make sure he has anything he needs before doing the same."

Another single knock on the wall. Will smiles.

Robertus nods to him as he leaves, all formal warmth, the same as Hannibal. "Sleep well, Will. I suspect you've earned it."

Scream Through the Silence

Chapter Notes

> this chapter is long but uh Hannibal had a lot to say! happy halloween, the true horror is the fact that this fic is officially over 60 thousand words!

Will goes to bed about an hour later. Most of that hour is spent with Hannibal. Bless him, he's trying not to pry but Will can feel in every movement that he wants to. He's kind, though. Gentle.

...Pushy.

Robertus hadn't been exaggerating when he warned about Hannibal fussing over him. He already dotes over Will more than anyone ever has on a good day, but tonight he seems incapable of stopping himself. All *'Are you sure you don't want another serving, Will? I can give you more, really, there's more than enough to spare.'* Until he's almost sick with a mixture of guilt and fondness. It's sweet, but it also makes Will want to run for the door.

Hannibal is *anxious* tonight. Visibly, undeniably distressed. It's coming out in the form of constant generosity, but it doesn't fool Will for a minute.

By the time he's crawling under the covers in their guest room— assuring Hannibal that no, the blanket Robertus laid out is plenty, *really* — he feels like he shouldn't have come here to begin with. That Hannibal and Robertus would've been much better off if he'd just found a tree to crash under, or better yet just swallowed his pride and begged his dad to let him back in. He hates feeling so selfish, taking from their home and upsetting his boyfriend.

Still, he's going to sleep in a warm bed, with dry clothes and a full stomach. Taking might not come easily to him, but *having?*

Having doesn't feel too bad at all.

His overthinking is put to a swift, merciful end, though. Will is out like a light the moment his cheek hits the pillow.

It's a shame, really, that he wakes up to the sound of a scream about two hours later.

He sits up with a start, heart pounding and head spinning. It takes him a few seconds to realize that *he* is the one screaming his lungs out, and he clamps a sweat-soaked palm over his mouth. Air whistles through his nose as he tries to regain his bearings. He's counting the seconds, waiting for his dad to come in and yell at him for screaming in his sleep again—

This isn't the pull-out sofa. This isn't his dad's place.

He isn't alone.

Will is still covering his mouth when he sees Hannibal standing near the bed, the dim light of the hallway pouring in where the other boy had opened the guest room's door.

'Are you alright?' Hannibal signs quickly. *'It seemed like you were having a nightmare.'*

Trying hard to even his breathing, Will peels his hand from his face. He wipes the sweat from his brow. *'Sorry,'* is all that he says.

Hannibal shakes his head, stepping closer. *'No, don't apologize. I was just frightened for you, that's all. I thought that...'* he falters, trying to mask the terror around his eyes. *'Well, it doesn't matter. I'm glad it was only a dream.'*

It's then that Will realizes how much his boyfriend's hands are shaking. Another wave of guilt washes over him. *'I didn't mean to scare you. I'm alright, really. I get these nightmares a lot, I should have warned you.'*

Gently, he brushes Will's damp curls back from his face before signing *'Would it help to talk about the dream?'*

Will declines immediately. No point in discussing it, it won't help and it'll only make Hannibal worry. *'It's no big deal. You can just go back to bed if you want. I'm sorry about waking you—'*

'Come upstairs with me.'

He blinks. Will's eyes lock onto Hannibal's. *'What?'*

Hannibal swallows, shifting his weight a bit awkwardly. It's cute. *'You're pale as a sheet, Will,'* he explains. *'I doubt you'll be able to fall asleep anytime soon. You can come up to my room, I'll be happy to give you my company.'*

A part of him almost says no on instinct. He doesn't want to take any more from Hannibal than he already has, after all. But the nerves in the other boy's body language sway Will. He's never seen Hannibal so rattled, even if it was a false alarm. It makes him realize that this might be something Hannibal wants for his own benefit, not just Will's.

'Sure. If you want to.'

Hannibal smiles, still charming in the low light. He reaches out, places a hand on Will's cheek. Will nuzzles into it, always eager for the other boy's affection. Gently, his touch drifts down Will's face, along his neck, to his shoulder. In a gesture of reassurance, he squeezes.

Will flinches, hissing at the pressure on his bruised shoulder. He realizes his mistake a moment too late, Hannibal already saw his reaction. In an instant, all of the timid warmth leaves the room.

'You're hurt.'

'It's nothing,' Will lies.

'What happened to your arm, Will?'

'I'm fine!'

Hannibal moves to argue further, and Will stands from the bed. He takes Hannibal's hand in his own, walks toward the door, playfully tugs Hannibal forwards.

He may not know what Hannibal is thinking, but he has an educated guess. He's probably thinking about their first real date, about the promise Will made. Will's breaking that promise, and he knows it. Wasn't much of a promise to begin with, though. He hadn't been fully honest when he made it in the first place.

Maybe that's why Hannibal looks so hurt when he decides to just drop it. When he nods solemnly, and just leads Will upstairs without pressing further. As they ascend the stairs, Will holds Hannibal's hand nice and tight, and tries to broadcast through touch alone that everything is fine even though it isn't. He's not sure what else to do.

He does feel much more comfortable when they sit together on Hannibal's bed. The room is more familiar, already associated with positive memories. Will is awkward at first, not sure where the boundary lies with something like this. He's been *on* Hannibal's bed before, but never *in* it, and the unmade tangle of blankets where Hannibal had been sleeping looks awfully inviting, but he also doesn't want there to be any... *expectations* involved, so to speak. It's just a bed, isn't it? But he's scared to imply—

It's Hannibal who puts him out of his misery, immediately arranging and fluffing up pillows so that the two of them can recline before patting the mattress in encouragement. A powerful rush of relief hits him at how innocent the other boy looks, like he's not after anything. Will joins him immediately, sighing happily as he surrounds himself in soft warmth. The lamp beside Hannibal's bed stays on, so neither of them have to strain their eyes to carry a conversation.

'Comfortable?'

Will nods. *'Thanks. I already feel better, honestly.'*

Hannibal smiles, and it makes Will scoot a bit closer to him in the bed. *'What would you like to talk about?'*

He chuckles dryly. *'I guess a bedtime story is off the table,'* he jokes, and Hannibal smirks.

'For now, reading to you is beyond my abilities,' he replies. *'Next time, maybe.'*

Will blinks, sitting up a little. *'What, that soon? You're that close to—'* His fingers come to his own lips almost subconsciously, staring wide-eyed at the other boy.

Hannibal looks pleased, his soft hair shifting over his face when he nods. *'I did warn you that I'd had a breakthrough.'*

'You did, but I didn't... You're talking? Like, out loud?'

He nearly looks bashful, averting his eyes. *'Only just,'* he hedges. 'The reason for my issue was always psychological, but three years of disuse has still affected my verbal skills. My speech therapist has me do recitation exercises every evening— she seems to think it's only a matter of practice and confidence at this point.' He bites his lip, gives Will a look of concern. *'You aren't upset that I haven't spoken to you yet, are you? The only ones who have heard me are my therapist and Uncle, if that's any consolation.'*

Will shakes his head. He's still reeling a bit, but there's excitement brewing beneath his skin. *'No, of course not!'* he signs quickly, leaning even closer to Hannibal. *'No, I— take your time, you don't have to talk in front of me until you're ready. But that's— that's great, Han, I'm excited for you.'*

The relieved smile on Hannibal's face makes him melt. Selfishly, Will is already fantasizing. Poems, read as intended. Whispers in his ear that make him shiver. The shape of his own name on Hannibal Lecter's lips. Earlier on, he'd been a bit insecure about Hannibal's speech therapy. Worried that Hannibal wouldn't want him anymore, if he changed and Will stayed the same. He isn't scared of that anymore. For Hannibal, this is a good thing. That's what matters.

'I spoke to Uncle for the first time last week,' he confesses. *'I was so nervous, I couldn't even think of what to say, which was very unlike me. But my therapist was standing there, watching me. I had to say something. So I found myself just blurting "Hello, Uncle", and of course I stumbled over my syllables. I was mortified.'*

Will rolls his eyes good-naturedly. *'I doubt he was judging you, Han.'*

Hannibal shrugs. *'I know that. I still wanted it to be more impressive. I thought I owed him as much.'* He smiles, but it seems sad. *'He cried, all the same. We both did. It was... very cathartic.'*

It's rare that Hannibal allows himself to be so vulnerable, even with Will. It isn't lost on him, and he feels the pressure to say the right things like an iron chain around his neck. He's never been too good at saying the right things.

'I'm sure he's been worried about you,' he tries, and immediately cringes at the stupidity of it. *'I mean, after what, um... happened.'* Not helping, not helping. *'Three years is— you were only thirteen, I can't even imagine—'* he stops himself, shuts his eyes and bites his tongue. It's probably a good thing that Hannibal never opens up around him, if this is how Will is going to respond. Fuck, why does he have to be so much worse than everyone else at talking? *'I'm sorry,'* he signs, eyes still screwed shut. *'We don't have to talk about... any of this. Tonight. Or, ever, if you don't want to—'*

He flinches when Hannibal takes his hand and squeezes it. It's gentle, but he instinctively braces himself for something more harsh. The other boy looks sympathetic when Will opens his eyes, soft and concerned. It's a look that Will is getting accustomed to receiving, whether he likes it or not.

'Please relax, Will. You don't need to worry so much. If I didn't feel ready to discuss it, I wouldn't.' His mouth twists. *'I haven't discussed it, in fact. Not with anyone other than Uncle, and my psychiatrist.'*

Will nods, trying to absorb the sentiment. He's still terrified of fucking this up, the same as always. *'I just... it sounds like it would be hard to talk about, that's all. I mean, I've heard a lot of things at school— not that I believe any of them, or anything— but it's all... intense.'*

Hannibal tilts his head, assessing Will. *'Do you want to know what happened?'* he asks. *'The true version?'*

He swallows around the lump rapidly growing in his throat. *'Only if you want to tell me.'*

'It's far from a bedtime story,' Hannibal signs with a weak smile.

Will sighs. Leaning forwards, he presses his forehead to Hannibal's for a long, intimate moment. When he pulls away, he says *'I'm no stranger to the horrific, either. You know that.'*

The look Hannibal gives him in response tells him that they both know Will isn't talking about any monster in a movie. He takes a centering breath. *'Alright. To begin, I'll say that I grew up with my parents and my younger sister, up north on the Atlantic Coast. Uncle came along with my Father when he and my Mother immigrated to America from Lithuania.'* He smiles a bit wistfully. *'My Mother used to tell me stories about her youth in Europe. She wanted to take me to Italy, when I graduated. Something of a rite of passage.'*

'She read poetry,' Will recalls, heart already turning tight and cold in preparation. *'To you and Mischa.'*

Hannibal nods. His eyes look past Will, toward his darkened window. *'I loved my family. I was always... peculiar, but they never made note of it. Never asked me to change. I was fortunate, in that regard,'* He notes, almost apologetically, then takes a heavy breath. *'One night, I awoke to the sound of our front door opening. Footsteps I didn't recognize. I was afraid, so I hid beneath my bed.'* He shakes his head. *'I thought it was a burglar, maybe. I don't know what I thought.'*

Will feels sick. He feels like he's on the steep incline of a roller coaster, just waiting for the inevitable, terrible drop. He almost wants to ask Hannibal to stop. He can't.

'I only realized the gravity of my situation when I heard my Mother, screaming from my parents' bedroom.'

The image of Hannibal just a few minutes ago leaps to his mind. Terrified, after waking to the sound of someone screaming in a nearby bedroom. Had he thought that awful night was repeating itself?

'I snuck out of my room, and when I arrived at their doorway I saw a man I didn't recognize, murdering my Mother in her bed. My Father was already dead beside her.'

Desperate for something to hold on to, Will clutches at Hannibal's arm. There's a darkness in Hannibal's eyes that makes Will want to run and hide. He stays put anyway.

'As silently as I could, I ran to Mischa's room. I pulled her from her bed, I tried to convince her to sneak out the window and run to safety.' Tears start welling in Hannibal's eyes, and when the first one falls Will reaches out to brush it away. *'But she was afraid. She wouldn't listen to me, she was only seven years old, she just wanted to know where Mama was. Her crying led our intruder straight to us, and by then there was nothing I could do.'*

Will realizes that his heart is pounding. He tries to force himself to breathe.

'She called my name, just before he—' Hannibal stops himself, shakes his head forcefully. *'The rest is missing. I'm sorry, it's gone.'*

He blinks. *'Missing? What do you mean, missing?'*

Hannibal shakes his head again. *'It's just gone, I can't remember any of it. It's as if my mind went black, and my body continued on without it. When I returned to myself, I was...'* He swallows again, stares hard at the window. *'I was kneeling over the corpse of the man who'd killed my family.'*

There it was. The drop he'd partially known was coming. Will's heart lands deep in the pit of his stomach. *'Oh my God, Hannibal.'*

'I'd killed him with my hands,' He continues, trembling as he signs. *'My arms ached, I was still striking what was left of him, I couldn't make myself stop. I realized that I was screaming. My throat was raw, as if I'd been screaming for a long while. That was why a neighbor called the police, in the end. A simple noise complaint. I didn't stop until a policeman physically restrained me. The moment he did, the moment I stopped screaming— I didn't speak again.'*

Will shudders. It's awful, and it feels like there's nothing he could possibly do or say to make it any better. How is he meant to respond to something so horrible?

'I understand if you want to leave, now.'

It startles him back to the moment. Out of the bloodstained bedroom of Mischa Lecter and into this room, where Hannibal is looking at him with those dark, teary eyes. *'What?'*

'Now that you know what I've done,' Hannibal clarifies. *'And that I don't regret it.'*

The thought of leaving hadn't even occurred to him. Perhaps it should have. His boyfriend has killed someone. In self-defense, maybe, but he's dating a *murderer.* Should he be repulsed right now? Why isn't he scared?

'The same thing happened when you attacked Mason,' Will signs. And yes, that's why. Why he isn't even really that surprised, why he could never fully dismiss some of the rumors he'd heard about Hannibal. *'I saw it in your face. You didn't want to stop once you started.'*

Hesitant, Hannibal nods. *'Another loss of control. I remember seeing him knock you to the ground, I remember bringing you back home. Everything between is... missing.'* A look of contempt flashes over his features. *'Seeing you there, helpless while he hurt you— it was far too familiar for my liking.'*

Hannibal reaches out. With a tender hand, he tucks Will's wild curls behind his ear. Maybe it's wrong, but Will feels an odd flutter in his chest, all the same. *'I care for you, Will. More than I think you realize. I'd do anything for you.'*

Anything.

It doesn't dawn on Will until he's catching Hannibal in a kiss that this is probably the most time they've spent alone together *without* kissing. Usually it's the first thing he does once they're away from prying eyes.

Hannibal lets out a blissful sound against Will's lips, immediately taking Will's face in his hands and running the pads of his thumbs over his cheeks. He keeps holding Will close even when they part, hanging on as long as he can.

'I'm not leaving,' Will signs. *'Not if you want me to stay.'*

For a moment, Hannibal seems frozen by the words. Unable to believe, maybe, that Will isn't afraid of him. That he understands that Hannibal did what he needed to survive, the same as Will.

And then he's kissing Will again. Passionate, honest, fragile. He kisses Will like he's worth something.

Will knows what he wants to say. He feels it, deep in his chest where his most hidden emotions are all locked away from the world. It's too much to hold in, though. More importantly he doesn't *want* to anymore. Hannibal deserves to hear it. He's given Will so much tonight, not just food and a bed but so much of himself. He needs to know, needs Will to say it. Be brave, Will, for once in your life be brave.

He's blushing when Hannibal lets him go, gasping for air while his heart slams into his ribs. *'Hannibal...'* He braces himself. Tries to seize the tiny piece of courage in his gut. *'Han, I think I—'*

'Can I ask you something?'

Just that easily, the slight courage he had leaves him. Will sighs, part disappointment and part relief. *'Of course you can.'*

Hannibal furrows his brows. Licks his lips. *'What happened tonight?'*

He blows a lock of hair from his face, looking to the ceiling. *'...My dad and I got into a fight,'* He signs after a moment. Will doesn't want to lie to Hannibal, if he can help it. *'He told me to leave, so I left. I think he was bluffing, but I guess I just wanted to call him on it.'*

It doesn't ease the worry in his boyfriend's face. *'What were you fighting about?'*

Again, he doesn't *want* to lie. But he knows that if he tells Hannibal that it was about money, he'll think about that damned tape player. It wasn't Hannibal's fault, Will didn't blame him. He was just trying to be a good boyfriend, like always. The last thing he wanted was to give Hannibal more to worry over. Eventually he settles for *'You know how he is. He gets pissed if the wind blows wrong. He'll get over it.'*

There's that resigned sympathy again. The lies are starting to pile up, and Will's never been a convincing liar. It's not just with Hannibal, either, he's lying about something to everyone he knows. What choice does he have?

'Alright,' Hannibal signs at last, and Will tries to smile at him. It doesn't seem like it helps. *'At any rate, I'm glad you came here. I don't want to think about what might have happened to you otherwise.'*

Trying like hell to lift the dour mood, Will takes Hannibal's hand and kisses his knuckles. Thankfully, Hannibal smiles.

He takes another deep breath, shaking the tension from his arms. *'I'm afraid I haven't done very well in the area of bedtime stories,'* he notes, and Will feels the air start to clear.

Will lies back against the pillows, patting the space beside him how Hannibal had before. When the other boy is comfortable by his side, Will signs *'Tell me more about your Mother.'*

Hannibal tilts his head. *'You're sure?'*

He nods, pressing his cheek to the pillow. *'I never really... knew my Mom,'* he confesses. *'I like it when you talk about yours. Tell me a story about her. Something happy.'*

'Well... if you'd like.' He shifts in bed, hands moving more swiftly over time as his eagerness for the story grows. *'Have I ever told you that my Mother taught me to cook? I'm Italian, on her side, and she used to say that no son of hers could go about life not knowing his way around the kitchen. She used to make this soup, when I was a child, with clear broth and handmade meatballs. And when I was little I would beg to be allowed to help her make it...'*

The bed is warm. The pillowcase smells like the citrus in Hannibal's shampoo. Hannibal Lecter is a strong, adoring presence at his side.

Will has never felt so safe.

Facing Fears

Chapter Notes

this is the third chapter in a row where I've been like "oh this came out sadder than I originally planned" so I'm PROMISING that chapter 25 will be HAPPY and I'm HOLDING MYSELF TO THAT I'm sorry

also THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH for 25 THOUSAND reads!!!!!! that means the entire world to me and I can't thank each and every one of you enough!!!!!!!

Will wakes feeling more calm than he has in years. There's no construction outside, no nightmares startling him awake, no couples fighting overhead. He's... comfortable. Warm but not overly so, the sunlight filtering in through the window and gently coaxing him from sleep. He stretches, humming a little in contentment as he nuzzles his cheek into his pillow—

His pillow moves. Shifts beneath him, a rise and fall, like it's alive. Will's eyes snap open.

He hadn't meant to fall asleep in Hannibal's bed, last night. They'd never agreed on that, and Will fully intended to talk with him until Hannibal calmed down, and then sneak back to the guest bedroom to sleep. Apparently he never made it, though. He remembers Hannibal telling a story about decorating their family Christmas tree with Mischa— how had that story ended? It's fuzzy. He'd dozed off.

Worse still, his sleeping mind was evidently much more *clingy* than his waking one. His legs are tangled with Hannibal's, his arm thrown loosely around the other boy's body. Most damming of all, though, his face is half-buried in Hannibal's chest. Well, being calm was nice while it lasted. He goes completely still, frantically trying to determine if Hannibal is awake or not. Maybe he's asleep. Maybe Will can still roll away and—

A sleep-heavy hand comes to rest on Will's head, lazily petting his unruly curls. Will's heart stops. The touches continue, aimless and easy. Fingertips tucking his hair behind his ear, blunt nails scratching at his scalp. The hand not in Will's hair comes to rest on the small of his back, Hannibal's arm woven easily around Will's waist. Holding him there.

...Will can't seem to remember the last time he was *held.* Last night's somewhat dramatic embrace notwithstanding, he's a stranger to this kind of affection. Hannibal *touches* him plenty, of course. Kisses him dizzy and holds his hand and strokes his hair in much the same way he is right now. This is new, though. Intimate in a way that a kiss simply isn't.

It hurts him, if he's honest. It hurts to know that Hannibal probably doesn't realize just how special he is to Will. He sees it in the other boy's face, every time Will lies, or withdraws. That Hannibal feels like he's letting Will get so *close,* while Will only responds by keeping

him at arms' length. It isn't true, though. Or at the very least, it's so much more complicated than that.

Hannibal is closer than anyone's ever been. Will's seen his father every day for his entire life, but the man barely even knows him. Will's had friends, here and there, but their impressions on him are so shallow that Will lets them go as soon as his bags are packed. And yet here he is, held tight in Hannibal's arms even though he knows full well that it'll only make it hurt worse when he's gone. Hannibal has to see that, doesn't he?

The other boy's heartbeat is pressed to Will's ear, steady and unending. A reminder that this is *real,* but also that it's happening *now.* Here, in this moment and no other. And he's wasting it by worrying. He'll be gone, before he knows it, and Hannibal won't be there to hold him anymore. He doesn't want to remember this morning and wish he'd held on tighter.

Will wraps his arms around Hannibal, curling closer with a stubborn sigh. Hannibal only freezes up for a second, and then he's back to petting Will's hair. Will lies there, shuts his eyes, lets it happen. He wishes that Hannibal could just... *know.* That he could be sure of how much he means to Will, without him having to say it. And then he realizes how cowardly that wish is, so he wishes that he could be brave enough to just come out and say it himself.

And when that wish seems far-fetched, he wishes to have more wishes.

He loses sense of how long they lie there, not talking but simply existing together, their breaths falling into sync. He doesn't want it to end, though. He feels like the world has forgotten about them, left them behind in the best possible way. His life has gone still, just for a handful of moments. The two of them rest, and he savors every second.

The knock on Hannibal's bedroom door sends the Earth spinning again, and Will can't suppress the little petulant sound it brings out of him. Stubborn, like a child asking for five more minutes.

"Hannibal?" Robertus calls from the other side of the door. Hannibal reaches up, knocks on the wall behind his headboard once in acknowledgment. "Hannibal, wake up, Will is gone!"

Hannibal sighs. He doesn't want to, but Will scoots away, letting the other boy get out of bed.

"I went to check on him," the older man explains as Hannibal opens the door. "But the guest room is empty. I don't— ah."

Will makes eye contact with Robertus over Hannibal's shoulder. He feels his face turn hot, and Robertus goes red just as quickly. He clears his throat awkwardly. "Well, good morning, Will."

Sheepishly, Will waves. Unease starts forming a knot in his gut. Robertus seems awfully flustered, surely he doesn't think that Will and Hannibal had been—

"You've overslept," Robertus says to Hannibal, more clipped than before. Stern. Disapproving. Will fiddles with the sheet, his anxiety only growing. "Would you like me to make breakfast, or—" He can't see what Hannibal is signing at this angle, but the immediacy

with which he responds indicates his answer. Of course, he wants to feed Will himself. Robertus sighs sharply. "Go on, then."

Will's sure he's not supposed to hear it, when Robertus hisses at Hannibal as the pair moves into the hall, but he catches it. *"No boys in your bed, Hannibal,"* he scolds. *"Lord, what would your mother say?!"*

He curls into a ball once he's alone in the bedroom, fear suddenly dragging him under. Should he just hop out the window and make a run for it? There's a tree outside, he could probably manage to climb down it. He can't face Robertus again, ever. He still doesn't understand why the man was being nice to him to begin with.

Will's guts twist up like pretzels. He knows. He *knows.* Robertus knows that Will has corrupted his only nephew, and yet he let Will into his home anyway. Is this a trap? When is the other shoe dropping?

Will can't make himself move. Paralyzed in the once soothing bed, just waiting for the end. He hides his face in the crook of his arm, even though it won't make any difference. He can hear movement downstairs. The distant hum that indicates that someone is speaking, even if it's too far away to make out any words. Eventually other things make their way to him. The sound of sizzling in a pan. The scent of good bacon. His stomach growls and he ignores it.

He bites down on his lip when he hears footsteps coming up the stairs, flinches when three gentle knocks sound on the doorframe. No, no, no.

"Are you alright?"

Will forces himself to look up at Robertus, leaning on the threshold. He shouldn't be hiding, he's not a child. It doesn't make him feel any less scared.

"Hannibal is making pancakes," The older man says, almost hesitant. "With fresh blueberries, and bacon."

He doesn't realize how hard he'd been clutching the fabric of his borrowed sleep pants until he unfurls his fist and the ache makes him wince. *'I'm not hungry,'* he lies.

Robertus smiles, but it's a sad sort of smile. "I'm beginning to understand why he's so hellbent on feeding you, then, if hunger can't motivate you to eat anything."

Will just shrugs, tracing the plaid lines across his knees. He shuts his eyes when Robertus closes the door and makes his way nearer.

"I'd like to speak with you before I leave for work, if that's alright with you."

Here it comes. No way out. God, please just make it quick. The mattress shifts where the older man sits on the edge of the bed.

"There's no need to be afraid, Will, I only want to talk."

He hugs his knees even closer to his chest, but he forces himself to look back at Robertus. The older man is silent for a long moment, like he hasn't quite worked out what he wants to say. Will feels sick with anticipation, waiting to be called a faggot and chased out the door. Eventually, Robertus sighs.

"I know you and I haven't gotten to know each other very well..."

Will braces himself. Holds his breath.

"...But it's important to me that you know you are always welcome here."

He blinks.

"I never want to see you say that you have nowhere else to turn, not when I have a say in the matter. Is that clear? There will always be a place for you in my home."

The whiplash is immense. Will feels like he needs to lie down. That can't be right, can it?

"I said: is that clear, Will? You can arrive at any hour, for any reason, and I will open our doors to you."

No. No, this is the part where Robertus turns him away. It has to be.

'I... yes, sir, I understand.'

Robertus smiles again, nothing but polite. "Good. Now come downstairs. Hannibal will have a fit if your breakfast goes cold."

-

'Are you feeling okay, Will? You're pale.'

Will chews his lip, anxiety refusing to let him go even as it becomes increasingly apparent that nothing is about to jump out and eat him. Robertus had eaten quickly, in a rush to make it to work on time. He'd left Will alone with his nephew, with little more than a 'Have a pleasant day' on his way out the door. He should be relieved. He should be giddy with the weight that has been taken off his shoulders. The nausea refuses to pass.

'Your uncle knows about us,' he notes, and Hannibal grimaces slightly.

'You aren't angry with me, are you? It was accidental, really.'

'I would've liked a warning.' It's an understatement.

Hannibal looks down at his empty plate. Humble. *'I only told him about you to begin with because I never imagined anything would come from it. I could hardly lie about it by the time we were dating, the change in my attitude was obvious.'*

Will frowns. *'Wait. Told him about me, as in...'*

'As in that I had a crush on you, yes,' he confesses with a small smile.

'And your uncle was just... fine with that?' he clarifies, entirely disbelieving.

Hannibal nods, as if it's nothing. *'He's known that I was gay since I was fourteen. I told you last night, my family has never minded that I was different. He was nothing but pleased when I told him that you felt the same for me as I do for you.'* His smile turns sad, a bit shy. *'I know that he only wants me to be happy, at the end of the day. To move on, grow up, find love. Like a normal teenager, or as close as I can come to it.'*

Normal. It's always just out of reach, isn't it? The one expectation he can never seem to live up to, the finish line that never gets closer. He has brushes with normal, when he's with Hannibal. Fleeting little glimpses at it, like spotting a deer in the woods. Moments where he and Hannibal are alone, and he feels accepted and safe and *seen.* The way he imagines normal kids do.

Maybe he's worse off, for having tasted it. Maybe Frankenstein's monster would've been happier if he'd never ventured out into the world to begin with. When Will and his father are gone, moved on to some other town with some other school, it's going to hurt worse than any time he's ever left something behind. Like leaving home.

Will's never had a home to leave before.

'I should probably get going,' he signs, already standing from the table.

Hannibal cocks his head. *'Why the rush?'* he asks. *'It's barely ten o'clock.*

Will shrugs, but he knows it doesn't come off as casual as he'd wanted. *I'd rather just get it over with, instead of just dreading it all day. Like ripping off a band-aid.'* It's a more honest answer than he's been giving Hannibal, lately. Just maybe not in the way he thinks.

That makes the other boy stand, as well. *'You said yourself that your father wanted you to leave— what makes you so sure he'll take you back?'*

'He's family, he has to,' he counters. *'Do you know what your uncle did with my clothes?'*

'You don't have to leave, you know.'

It makes his mouth turn dry. There it is. The offer he's been praying wouldn't come, for the sake of his strength. Too weak to say yes, too weak to say no. Hannibal takes a step closer to him, smiles gently.

'You could stay. Uncle said that you could stay.' Another step. *'I want you to stay.'*

Everything Will wants to say comes crashing forward at once, bottlenecking painfully at the very edge of his mind. *'I'm sorry.'* Another dose of honesty.

Hannibal shakes his head. *'You don't need to apologize, Will, just... talk to me. Please.'*

Will bites his lip. There are tears building in his eyes. and he stubbornly blinks them away.

I wish I knew what to do. That's what he wants to say. I wish I knew what to do, I wish I knew where to go. I wish I'd kept you further than arm's length while I still had the chance. I wish you didn't have to be so sad for me all the time. I wish you didn't love me enough to hang on, and I wish I didn't love you too much to let you go.

Fuck, maybe he was right to wish for more wishes earlier.

Hannibal kisses him. Soft, tender. *'Please.'*

'I'm scared.'

He looks into Hannibal's eyes, his vision swimming. A few tears, so hot that they feel like they burn his cheeks, slip past his lashes when he shuts his eyes again. Hiding, even now he can't stop himself from hiding. *'I'm so scared, Han. I'm so fucking scared.'*

This time when Hannibal holds him, Will clings so tightly it hurts. More tears fall, but he refuses to sob. He holds the building wail between his teeth desperately, he's *not* falling apart again. He's shaking. Hannibal holds him. Pets his hair.

"Don't..."

Will freezes. Everything stops around them. Hannibal huffs in frustration, irritated with the waver present in the deep voice by Will's ear. "Don't be... s-scared, Will." A hard swallow, a weak cough. "Don't be scared."

Hannibal doesn't let him go. Doesn't stop stroking his fingers through Will's curls. Will can't seem to make himself breathe. The ground feels like it's shifted under their feet, the rumble that had been Hannibal's *voice* against his chest like an earthquake. The words sink to his bone marrow, the timbre and tone making their way directly into his brain and echoing again and again. Poems come back to him, full and rich like they've had new life breathed into them. The lines are stuttering and unsure, in the same way Hannibal had stumbled over his syllables. Will's never loved a voice more.

Face pressed to Hannibal's shoulder, safe in the sanctuary of his arms, Will nods.

-

'I want you to promise me something, Will.'

Will looks from Hannibal's hands to his face. They're sitting in Hannibal's car, parked in their usual meeting place. Hannibal hadn't wanted him to walk. He hadn't wanted Will to go at all, but it seems Hannibal has finally started to realize how stubborn Will can be. Fuck, but Will really is dreading getting out of this car. If Hannibal asked him to come home with him again, he's not sure he could make himself decline.

'Promise me that if you feel unsafe again, you'll come to me. Don't wait for it to get worse, don't spare a moment on guilt. Leave the moment you need to, and come to me. Can I trust you to do that?'

Will nods, trying hard to ready himself for what happens when he leaves the car.

'Promise me.'

He bites his cheek. *'I promise,'* he signs, and he hopes it'll be a promise that he winds up keeping, this time. *'I'll come to you if I need it, I promise.'*

Hannibal accepts it, leaning across the car to press a chaste kiss to Will's lips. *'I'll stay parked here for a while, in case your father isn't feeling apologetic,'* he signs, sitting back in the driver's seat. *'Or if you change your mind.'*

Will smiles. *'Thank you.'*

'And Will?'

God, those sad brown eyes are going to be the fucking death of him. *'Remember what I told you.'*

-

It feels like waking up from a dream, knocking on the door. Like Hannibal's world was nothing but a pretty fantasy, and now he's been dropped back into harsh reality.

His hands shake, and he curls them into fists at his sides. That perfect voice rings in his head, like a mantra. Don't be scared, Will. Don't be scared.

All of the words in the world couldn't have made him keep his head up when his dad opened the door.

Part of Will was almost anticipating that his father would welcome him with open arms. Would hug him, patting him solidly on the back before bringing him inside. That he'd ask if Will was tired, or hungry, or hurt.

"...Hey, Willy."

His eyes stay on his shoes. *'Can I come in?'*

His father doesn't say a word, just holds the door open and steps out of Will's way. Will lets out the breath he'd been holding, but it doesn't feel much like relief.

"I gotta tell you," he says as Will enters. "I wasn't sure if you were gonna come back."

Will looks up at his dad. Before he can let himself cry, he smiles. *'Where else would I go?'*

Flowchart

Chapter Notes

> thank you SO MUCH to everyone who was so patient and understanding about my putting this fic on hiatus. It genuinely meant the world to me that I was able to take a break for my health with minimal guilt. My goal moving forward is to update this fic at least once a month.
>
> So without further ado, I believe I promised you guys a... less dramatic chapter for ch25? So here's something a bit more 'slice of life' style. Much Love, SW <3

It's ironic, given his own unique circumstances, that Will has something of a love/hate relationship with silence.

It's better than *noise,* he'll give it that. Given the choice between a quiet room and a noisy room, he would opt for the quiet ten times out of ten. Noise is his fucking nemesis, he hates it. Makes him all overstimulated and twitchy and short of breath.

But *silence?*

Silence isn't always a walk in the park, either. There is most definitely a good kind of quiet and a bad kind. The good quiet sounds like a library on a rainy day, like a gently babbling stream and dappled light through leaves. It sounds like being alone with Hannibal in his room, when he lets his record player go quiet because he's too engaged with their conversation— or their *not* conversation— to notice that his damned 60s records that Robertus got him hooked on have come to a close. He loves those quiets.

The bad quiet is out there too, though. That one sounds like Bev's pre-class chatter running dry, and Will not knowing how to bring it back. It sounds like when he's trying to fall asleep and the absence of a distraction makes his thoughts start buzzing so aggressively that he has to slap his temple with his palm. It sounds like sitting down for dinner with his dad and being desperate for the man to say *something,* to make it feel normal again, to break the suffocating tension between them before it eats Will alive.

Will wishes it were more simple than all that. He wishes that it could just be that noise was bad and quiet was good. Then all he would ever need to do is avoid sound, and he'd be happy. He's starting to think that nothing is without some complications.

Right now, as Will makes the long lonely journey from his high school to the docks, the quiet is a bad one. He's been in his head a lot, lately, as if thinking in circles has ever actually solved anything for him. Venturing bravely down the river of his thoughts and following every forked path to seek out every possible conclusion, even as he knows logically that he

can't accurately predict the future. There's no *point* in deliberating this much, especially not when he's so short on time. No, he needs to act.

For a while, Will had tried to pretend that it didn't matter. He's only known these people for four months, he doesn't *owe* them anything. But that doesn't ease the ever-increasing pressure on him. A weight on his chest that only gets heavier, punching the air from his lungs.

Beverly's not talking to him. He doesn't know how to fix that. He'd been scared to tell her that his Father had forbidden him from seeing anyone, after their fight the month before. He'd simply told her then that he had to work, that he couldn't make time. And she understood.

By the time his dad eased up and returned his gift of free Thursdays, Will was already head over heels for Hannibal. Desperate to spend as much time with the other boy as he possibly could.

And now she thought that he'd abandoned her for Hannibal. Maybe that was true. He didn't have a fucking clue how to make it right between them, though— He couldn't very well explain that he was only so hellbent on seeing Hannibal because they spent half of their time listening to Julie London and figuring out the proper way to French.

Moreover, a part of him doesn't feel sorry. Sorry that their friendship was slipping down the drain, sure. He wants to get things back to how they were. But Hannibal isn't like Bev. If Will stops spending his limited time with him, Hannibal can't just hang out with his other friends. Surely she would understand that, if he told her? Or would it just make her hate him more?

Will kicks a pebble, sending it skittering down the sidewalk as he takes a turn to the left. He's about to restart from the beginning, trying out another opener with Beverly Katz in his mind, when he stops in his tracks. There, fervently sniffing at the base of a stop sign, is a dog. A big one, with long brindle patterned fur and cocked ears. There's a leash hanging limp and useless from its neck, signaling to Will that the dog must've gotten away from its owner.

Unable to help himself, Will immediately moves to approach the dog, making to grab the end of its leash. The dog flinches back, quickly running in the other direction.

Will curses inwardly. He knows better than to move suddenly near a strange animal. His excitement had just gotten the best of him. The dog stops a few yards away, looking back at him anxiously. Will looks up and down the street, scanning the area for the dog's possible owner, and sees no one.

Slowly, Will takes another step toward the dog. He bends down low, almost bowing, and holds out a timid hand. Please, please. Will looks at the dog and smiles, even if he knows it won't mean anything.

The dog eyes him warily for a long while, neither advancing nor retreating. Will's back starts to ache. He kisses the air, rubs his thumb over the pads of his fingers, whistles softly. Come on.

Will gives the dog a once over— it's dirty, but not sickly or mangy. It's probably been separated from its owner for more than a few hours, but not more than a few days. He keeps

his movements steady as he crouches on the sidewalk, keeping his eyes on the animal.

'You hungry?' he signs to the dog, mostly just to humor himself as he begins to ease his backpack off of his shoulders. With nervous, eager hands, he fishes inside for a small plastic bag.

The past weekend has made things... different, between Hannibal and himself. Another branching path for Will to agonize over, another problem with no solution.

Hannibal isn't stupid. He knows what's going on, no matter how much Will tries to hide. He's known since the beginning, most likely. Will doesn't even understand what he's trying to accomplish by lying anymore, why he still can't make himself tell the full truth. It's too late, Hannibal saw. He saw Will drenched in rain, crying and clinging to him in the foyer. He saw how Will sobbed and heaved and fell to pieces, how he screamed and thrashed in his sleep and refused to talk about any of it. He saw Will recoil when Hannibal pressed the bruises on his arm.

And it's only made Hannibal more hellbent on helping, which only makes Will feel more guilty, more grateful, more like Will can't do anything to hurt him.

The first day after their sudden sleepover, Hannibal had given him lunch, same as always. And then he'd passed a Ziploc across the table.

Peanut butter crackers, cashews, an obviously home-baked chocolate chip cookie. *'Take this home with you,'* Hannibal had urged him, that worry in his eyes especially present.

Will hadn't been able to say no. He needed to. He couldn't.

He's almost glad that he hadn't mustered the will to refuse, now. Will pulls his boyfriend's daily offering from the backpack, shaking it to entice the dog. He forgoes the box of golden raisins and the chewy granola bar, ripping open a small sachet of pretzels with his teeth. The dog startles when Will tosses a pretzel to lie at its feet, but after sniffing it for a moment the dog eats it with gusto. Will smiles, holding up another pretzel at arm's length and making more kissy sounds. It's a good use for the care package. Better than the fate the other ones have met, at least.

His latest falling out with his father hadn't been without its consequences. No more lunch money, which he'd expected. No more ways to save up. It stung but he'll live. His father had tried to return Hannibal's tape player, but he didn't have a receipt so they would only offer him store credit. Will was silently furious that his dad had essentially used *Hannibal's* money to buy CDs for his truck, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

The worst punishment, though, is that Will is now being subjected to "random" checks of his backpack when they get back from the docks. They might become actually random, over time, but as of now they're daily. Will hands the bag to his father every afternoon, watching him paw through every single pocket and shake out every book, looking for contraband. No way to smuggle anything in or out, unless Will could slip it up his sleeve.

It's a nauseating cycle, back and forth and back again. Every day, Hannibal gives him a care package. Snacks and treats, always with love. Every day, Will thanks him for it because he can't make himself turn it down. Can't make himself explain to Hannibal that these gifts could get him killed if he brought them home. Every day, Will stops near a trash can on his walk to the docks. He scarfs down as much of the bags' contents as he can, hating that any of it is going to waste but unable to save any for later, and then he trashes the rest. Every day, his bag is clean and he passes the check.

He could tell Hannibal, maybe, to stop. That it's sweet, and that he makes Will feel valued and cared for and adored— but that Will can't accept the offerings. That he's not actually helping in the way he thinks he is, that he's only making Will feel guilty, and embarrassed, and *sad.* It's another branch of the river that he's been considering. Every time he does, though, he remembers the look on Hannibal's face when he'd been awakened by Will's screams. The fear, the worry, the affection. No. Like it or not, doing this for Will matters to Hannibal. It makes him feel like he's making a difference, that he's helping. He can't take that away.

After what feels like an eternity, the dog takes a few tentative steps towards him. Will grins wide when it sniffs the pretzel in his outstretched fingers, finally taking it and crunching loudly. Will moves to pet it, and the dog pulls back for a moment before returning to sniff him curiously. Will upends the pack of pretzels on the ground in front of him. This time when Will pats its side, the dog doesn't shy away. Will laughs, keeping his movements steady as he ruffles the dog's fur and scratches behind its ears. Cautiously, he picks up the hanging leash while the dog eats, looping its handle around his wrist in case the dog tries to run away again. He looks at the dog's collar, observing a red tag hanging from brown leather. *'Winston,'* followed by a phone number engraved in tiny silver text.

He nods to himself. Winston. That's a good name for a dog. Struggling to sling the backpack back on without getting tangled in the leash, Will takes one last look around, and then makes for the docks with Winston in tow. He's expecting Winston to put up more of a fight, but apparently he now associates Will with free snacks, because he trots alongside him obediently.

As he continues his route to the docks, Will can't make himself stop smiling. It's still quiet, but now that quiet is populated by the tag of Winston's collar jingling softly as he walks, his paws striking the sidewalk, his slightly panting breaths. Will keeps looking sidelong at him, his own hands bouncing as he stims happily at the sight.

Will's always had a soft spot for dogs. Ever since he was seven years old, and a half-starved pit bull had stumbled up to the parking lot behind their place in Memphis. Will had called her Daisy, and snuck her uncooked hot dogs from their fridge, and sacrificed one of his shirts for her to sleep on. Then one night there was a storm, and he snuck Daisy inside so that she wouldn't be caught in the rain. His dad had been furious, told him to stop feeding her. Will didn't listen, though. He'd fed Daisy scraps and picked the fleas from her fur until the day he moved away.

Now, as he strides down the street with Winston at his side, Will feels himself walking a little taller. He salutes a passing Sedan, proud to be seen for once. For a moment, he allows

himself to pretend that Winston is *his* dog. That he's taking his pet for an after-school walk, and that when they arrive home he'll give Winston a bath, and give him treats, and teach him to sit and stay. That Winston is going to sleep at his feet tonight, watching over him with innocent devotion.

Does Hannibal like dogs? He strikes Will as more of a cat person. He fantasizes about Hannibal loving dogs, anyway. About the two of them at the park, strolling along hand-in-hand, with Winston. It makes his chest ache with powerful, unadulterated *want.* He hates that he's been doing this, lately. Picturing an unrealistic, saccharine future— one where he and Hannibal are a happy adult couple. It's stupid, it'll never happen. He shouldn't waste so much time imagining raising a pet with Hannibal.

...Will likes cats, too. Not as much as dogs, but he wouldn't hate to have a cat. If Hannibal would prefer to get a cat, he could compromise. They could call her Irena, like the girl from *Cat People.*

By the time he ditches the rest of his care package and struts up to the docks, his mood has completely transformed. He feels lighter than he has in days, like he actually feels his age for once. His dad frowns at the pair as they approach, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun.

"The hell are you doing?" he calls out to Will. He's wary, but not outright angry. Will can tell by the set of his jaw.

'I found a dog!' Will signs excitedly, and his dad huffs.

"I can see that, Willy. I've told you before, you can't just drag home every mutt you find."

'He's lost,' Will defends, kneeling beside Winston to draw attention to his collar. *'He's not used to being out on his own. He's hungry, dad, I couldn't just leave him on the street.'*

He expects his dad to scold him, but instead he leans down and inspects Winston's tag with furrowed brows, a deep crease forming between them as he reads the number.

"Guess we could call its owner," his dad mumbles. "Tie uh... Winston here up to a post or something, I'll give that number a call after work and see if anybody picks up."

Will chews his lip. *'...What if they don't?'*

"Then we'll drop him off at the shelter in the morning."

He tries not to make his disappointment obvious, but it is.

"You can't have a dog, son. I don't know how many times you're gonna make me tell you that."

Will nods, moving to tie Winston's leash around a nearby pole. He knows, of course, that he can't keep the dog. It's not practical. Not when they move around so much. It wouldn't be fair, to make a dog live like that.

"Dogs are expensive," his father says, drilling in his point. "And pet-friendly places cost more to stay in, and they charge a fee if your dog shits on the rug."

Will's mouth twists. *'I know.'*

The older man is quiet for a moment, and Will can taste deliberation on the air. Like his dad is searching for words that just aren't coming. Things have been so *tense* between them since he kicked Will out. Will didn't think they were all that friendly with each other to begin with, but now everything feels even more stilted, more forced.

"Come on," he says at last. "I need your help with this."

Will smiles at Winston, ruffles his fur fondly, and moves to stand. He dusts off his palms on his jeans, and sets to work.

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There is almost no feeling, as far as Will is aware, that is quite as freeing as riding in the bed of a pickup truck. It's the only way he would travel, given the option. The wind whips his hair around his face and neck, the streets fading out of view in front of him as he faces the truck's rear. Will shuts his eyes, tipping his head back in the sun. His traveling companion does the same.

Winston was too big to ride in the pickup's cab with both of them, but Will was worried that he would try to jump out of the bed. So the natural solution was, of course, to have Will pile in the back with him. He stretches out his legs, squinting at the clouds overhead as Winston sniffs around at the empty cans and stray tools in the truck. He's got a tight grip on Winston's leash, cautious about their position, but the dog never makes to leap from the vehicle.

His dad tells Will to tie Winston up outside their room, but Will shakes his head. *'I'll stay out here with him,'* he insists, smiling down and scratching Winston's head. Like hell is he gonna go sit inside when there's a dog on the other side of the door.

The older man just shrugs. "Suit yourself." Without another word, he holds out an expectant hand. Will bites his tongue as he passes his father the worn backpack. It doesn't matter, he tells himself. The only thing he brought home is Winston, and his dad doesn't seem keen on confiscating him. It's still not pleasant, watching him rummage through the bag. Still feels violating.

His father nods to himself when he finishes, satisfied. "I'll put this inside for ya." He leans over Winston, peering down at his collar tag. Will watches him scribble down the phone number on the heel of his palm, praying that he'd get a digit wrong. That Winston's owner wouldn't answer the phone, that Winston didn't belong to anyone anymore.

He realizes how selfish it is. He's essentially wishing that Winston was abandoned, alone with no one in the world to look after him. And what if he was? Will's dad would never let him get a dog, he knows that. At best, he'd get to spend the night with Winston— he'd be willing to sit outside with him all night, rather than leave him on his own in the dark— and

then they'd be bringing him to the local shelter. The owner answering is the best outcome possible, the place where this river opens up to the sea. He should be hoping for it, excited.

Will doesn't feel excited when a blue Honda pulls into the parking lot an hour later. Winston had been napping, his fluffy head in Will's lap while Will stroked his back. It was quiet. The absolute best kind of quiet.

The quiet breaks the moment the car's door opens. Winston perks up immediately, to Will's dismay, leaving Will's side and straining against the leash, his tail swishing excitedly. A woman who looks to be in her thirties rushes over, arms already outstretched.

"Winston!" She coos, and Will makes his awkward way to his feet. Winston's weight on his thigh had sent pins and needles down Will's legs, and he winces at the discomfort of standing on half-asleep limbs.

The woman drops to her knees, wrapping both arms around the dog and babbling baby talk. Winston licks her face. Will feels cold with jealousy.

"My poor baby, you must be so hungry, Mommy's so sorry she let you get away." She looks up at Will, then, grinning from ear to ear. There are tears in her eyes. The jealousy grows, but he also feels guilty for being jealous. It isn't *her* fault that Winston isn't Will's dog.

"You must be Bill's son," she says, standing and offering him a hand, which Will shakes with a polite smile. "He mentioned on the phone that you found him."

Will nods enthusiastically. He squeaks when the woman folds him into a too-tight hug, slapping him lightly on the back a few times before pulling away. She smells like fabric softener.

"What's your name?"

He gives her another awkward smile, aiming for apologetic. He taps his throat twice, then signs *'Sorry, that's a secret,'* to demonstrate things more clearly. This combination of gestures usually gets the point across, and Winston's owner frowns.

"Oh, you poor thing." She speaks her next words annoyingly loud, clear and slow, with exaggerated movements of her face. "Can you understand me?"

Will nods quickly, trying not to cringe. He can't stand when people do that. He taps his ear, gives her a thumbs-up. Her brows draw together in response, but she doesn't question further.

Her grin returns. "Well, that was a really wonderful thing you did today, young man. I've been looking for Winston everywhere, I was starting to get scared I'd never find him!" A tear falls. Will's guilt outweighs his jealousy, finally. She takes his hand, squeezes. "You brought my best friend back to me. I can't thank you enough, really."

Will tries to shrug it off, tries to look warm, tries to communicate to her that he's glad he could help. He can't really tell if it translates, but he hopes it does.

Winston is sniffing the woman's legs, tail still wagging. With a soft, resigned sigh, Will hands her the leash. She takes it from him, still unabashedly happy-crying.

"Oh!" She moves to rummage in the oversize purse tucked under her arm. Will blinks in surprise when she pulls a purple billfold from inside, pressing a wrinkled sum of money into his palm. "Take this, please," she says. "It's the least I can do."

Will stares, dumbstruck. He crumples the cash in his fist, clutching it like he's scared it'll run away. *'Thank you,'* he signs, though he knows it won't mean a thing to her.

Winston whines at his owner's feet, then, and she looks lovingly down at him. "Well, I should hurry up and get Winston back home. You need a bath, don't you boy? Thanks again, for finding him. And thank your dad for calling me!"

Just like that, she's walking away. She loads her dog into her car. They pull out of the parking lot. Winston doesn't look back.

For a few minutes, Will just stands in place. He watches the place where Winston had been, as if waiting for him to reappear. Will knows that he won't.

He unfurls his fist, looking at his reward. Two twenty dollar bills, rumpled but no less valuable. Forty bucks?!

Impulsively, he considers shoving the bills into his sneakers. Waiting until his dad is asleep and then finding a new hiding place, rebuilding his savings. Or he could give it to Hannibal tomorrow, for safe keeping. Though Will suspects that Hannibal would just insist upon buying Will things with his own money, if Will ever tried to spend the forty.

Will sighs. It's too risky right now. Maybe soon, he can find a way to start saving again. But last weekend's disaster is still fresh on both his and his father's minds. The bruise on his shoulder still hasn't entirely faded. Not yet. It aches, makes his pride protest violently, but he knows what he has to do.

It's a long game, living with someone like Will's dad. You can't just think about today, you have to think about every day, stretching out forever, until the day you finally get out. Right now Will's dad trusts him less than ever, that's what he needs to focus on. If he wants the noose to lessen its grip, if he wants to breathe again, he needs to start generating more trust. No matter how much it stings.

He walks into their room, offering his dad a tight smile. The older man is sitting on the couch, his feet propped up on the stained coffee table.

"She pick up the dog?"

Will nods, and braces himself as he holds out his hand, presenting the money.

His father frowns, taking the cash from Will and studying it.

'She gave me a reward,' he explains. *'For finding Winston. Forty dollars.'*

Will's dad lets out a low whistle, a smile rising on his face. He folds the bills, shifting as he puts them in the back pocket of his jeans. Au revoir, savings.

"Shit, some people just have money to burn, don't they?" his dad prods with a rough chuckle. "Wasn't like we were holding the mutt ransom."

'She seemed pretty happy to have him back,' Will supplies.

His dad's mouth curls, rolling his next words around in his mouth before he speaks. Will braces himself.

"Hey, I got an idea. Let's go get dinner."

He blinks. *'Really?'*

The older man shrugs good-naturedly, making his grunting way to his feet. "Hell, why not? We just made forty bucks. I'm not saying we should burn it all, but we might as well live a little. We'll get hot wings or something."

Well, it's not a bus ticket, but at least he's still getting something out of it. He's learned to celebrate the small victories. *'Okay. Sounds good.'*

The river of his father, at least, he could make sense of. It's more clear which paths are right and which are wrong. It's just a matter of whether he's willing to take the right paths, at the end of the day. He still isn't sure if he's doing the right thing— if there even *is* a right thing when it comes to his father. Will doesn't know when sacrificing his own wants, his feelings, his needs, is worth doing it. When the benefits outweigh the costs.

He gets in the truck with his Father, rolling the window down so he can feel the evening air on his face. The ride is quiet.

Play Nice

Chapter Notes

> We're staring a new arc next chapter! Not sure yet if it'll be three episodes or just two, though. For now, enjoy PLOT

It is by the grace of God alone, Will thinks, that he's still allowed to experience things other than work and school.

Well, maybe by the grace of God and by his own pathetic nice-making, anyway. One benefit of being spineless, it makes it a hell of a lot easier to bend over backwards for his old man. Ordinarily he might find some hidden atom of pride, stashed away somewhere. Not now. He's been working double time to put his dad in a good mood and keep him there. The stakes are higher than ever, no time for fucking around.

'I'm not sure, yet, what sort of piece it should be in the end. I have a few ideas. The only thing I'm certain of is my model.'

Hannibal sits across from him in their booth, signing animatedly to him while Will stabs at a slice of key lime pie with his spoon. Another swallowing of his pride, though this one certainly tastes nicer than others.

He'd said yes to lunch, knowing damn well that Hannibal would be paying. He has to, even if Hannibal doesn't know it. Will still hasn't had the heart to mention that he's fucking broke.

It makes Hannibal happy, though. Spending money on him, feeding him desserts, hearing that things have been relatively drama-free between Will and his dad. As shitty as it feels to make his old man coffee every morning and bust his ass at the docks every evening, he has to admit that it feels pretty good to see Hannibal smiling the way he is right now.

'You'll do it, won't you?'

Will blinks, finally setting his spoon down beside his thoroughly mutilated pie. *'Sorry, what was that?'*

Hannibal huffs softly, but he doesn't seem too bothered that he has to repeat himself. His mood is too high to be ruined by something like that.

'For the art contest, darling. Could I draw you?'

It's all he's been able to talk about this afternoon. Something the local museum was running, apparently. A contest for artists under eighteen, with a gallery showing for the contestant and a cash prize for the best piece.

Perhaps he should've expected it, but the idea makes him blush all the same. *'You want to show a bunch of strangers a drawing of me?'*

'That's the idea, yes,' Hannibal replies, as simple as ever. *'Orpheus, perhaps. Or Endymion. Cephalus, as an homage to Guérin.'*

Will chokes on air. *'Cephalus was naked, Han.'*

'Well, of course I wouldn't submit a drawing of you naked,' Hannibal replies, and Will's stomach flutters at how the other boy grins at him. Like he's being adorable, yes, but also like he might want to draw Will naked under other circumstances. *'Either way, it was only a suggestion. I won't draw you in any pose you aren't comfortable with.'*

Will rolls his eyes, but his heart doesn't stop skipping. *'Yeah, okay, why not. I'm not good at sitting still, though.'*

Hannibal only smiles. *'That won't be a problem. I'm sure I'll be able to...'*

The remainder of what Hannibal has to say doesn't register. Will glances away, his eyes drawn to movement near the diner's entrance, and his stomach drops.

Maybe he should've expected, when he agreed to come here with Hannibal, that he might encounter Beverly. She comes here often after school, with or without him. Still, it's an unpleasant surprise to see her stop cold in the doorway.

They make eye contact, for one too-long moment. Will is the one who breaks it, his surely pained gaze flicking from Jimmy to Brian as if pleading for assistance.

And then she's leaving. Turning on her heel at the very sight of him, she storms out into the parking lot.

Will knows that he's left this for too long. He's known it for a while. Ignored it in favor of other things, letting it fester and naively hoping that by the time he came back to it there might *be* something to salvage. He can't leave it any longer.

He moves for the door, nodding awkwardly to Jimmy as he passes. Neither of them follow. They know, probably, that something explosive is about to happen. Best not to be caught in the blast.

Bev is sitting in the driver's seat of her parked car. She doesn't seem surprised when Will approaches, doesn't stop him from opening the passenger's door and falling into the seat beside her. She certainly doesn't look happy about it, but she doesn't stop him.

"Go away, Will," she says, making a point out of looking out the window.

'Come on, don't be like that.' It doesn't matter, and he knows it. She's turned away. Fun thing about being Nonverbal, you can't *make* anyone hear what you have to say.

'Look at me.' Nothing. Will huffs. *'I'm not leaving. You might as well talk to me, unless you wanna be here all day.'*

"I said go inside," she insists, crossing her arms. "Go hang out with Lecter, like you always do."

Real mature, Katz. *'Bev, seriously. I know I've been flaking on you a lot, but— Christ, you're not even listening to me.'* he snaps his fingers, demanding her attention. She still won't give it to him.

'You're being so stupid right now!' he signs, and she doesn't move. *'Really? You're just gonna ignore me? Fucking— I'm so scared of needles that I pass out when I get my blood drawn at the doctor. I once had a wet dream about the dentist from 'Little Shop of Horrors'. I'm scared to get closer to you because I don't want you to realize how sad and shitty my life is and start feeling bad for me!'*

It feels weirdly good. Like talking to a brick wall. He's not here to talk to a brick wall, though. Will grabs Beverly by the arm.

She yanks away, but she finally looks at him. "Let me go!"

'Don't shut me out, Bev.'

Maybe it's the gravity of the look on his face, but she settles. She frowns hard at him, more wounded than angry. "What do you even want?"

'To fix things?' he offers. *'I get it. You're pissed at me. Can we talk?'*

"I don't know, can we? Because it's seemed pretty fucking impossible to get through to you, lately."

Will sighs. *'That's not fair.'*

Bev blinks, and he can tell that he's said the wrong thing. Strike one. "Oh, I'm sorry, am I being too hard on you? You've been treating me like shit lately, Will. You spend all your time with Lecter, and you don't talk to me about anything anymore!"

'I... I've had a lot of shit going on,' he replies slowly, trying hard to keep a firm grip on his feelings. *'Personal shit.'*

"Right. And I'm like, a second-class friend, so I get axed."

'You know that's not what I meant.'

Bev holds up a hand, stopping him. "No, no. You'll tell Lecter everything, but I'm not allowed to know shit about what's going on with you. You can make time for Verger, and fucking *Bloom,* but I don't make the cut. No matter how hard I try to get close with you, it's just not good enough!"

His temper flares, an awkward jolt in his chest. *'And you've been so eager to tell me about how you've been rounding second base with Brian Zeller!'* he fires back, and she balks.

Her response comes out frighteningly slow, even measured. Strike two.

"Actually, Will, if you could step out of your own *ass,* you might have noticed that I *did* want to talk to you about it. You want to take a guess at how many chances I've had? How often you're willing to take five seconds to remember that other people have lives, too? You aren't the only person in the world with personal shit going on!"

'Really?! You're accusing me of being self-centered, now? That's your fucking damage?!' His hands are shaking, he can't stop. *'You don't have a God damned clue what you're talking about, you know that? You— you walk around, and you're stressed about homework, and gossip, and* ***who I'm talking to?*** *And you think that's supposed to make me feel sorry for you? I don't!'*

"Will!"

'You think Alana's the one with the Martyr Complex? No, it's you! Poor, noble Bev— you took in the freak and now he doesn't need you anymore. God forbid we let the fucking monster have more than one friend!'

"Will, slow down, I can't even tell what you're fucking saying!"

'So I'm sorry that I like spending time with someone who makes me feel normal for a little while! Somebody who doesn't look at me like I'm broken, somebody I don't have to change for —'

"Stop it!"

Will flinches. He freezes, his still-trembling hands still hanging in space. It's then that he realizes that he's gasping for air, that he's burning all over. He sniffs sharply, and a bead of wet rolls down his cheek. Horrified, he realizes that he's crying.

Bev shakes her head, gesturing to his hands. "See, this is what I'm talking about! Look, I get that it must be tiring, having to write shit down for everyone. But I have been learning a fucking language, for *you.* And instead of being patient, or— God forbid— fucking *grateful,* you just completely take it for granted. You need to slow down for me, Will! You can't just expect me to be able to understand you!"

She huffs, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I... I *want* to understand you," she says, more composed than before. "You don't want me to."

Will chews the inside of his wobbling lip. He rubs the tears roughly from his face. He hadn't even noticed them brewing, couldn't make himself stop them. *'It's not that. I do want you to understand me. I just don't know if you can.'*

When she scoffs, it makes Will burn with a potent mix of indignance and shame. "The things you're going through are just too complicated for us commonfolk to understand, is that how it is? How do you know that, if you won't even give me a chance to try?"

Gently, Beverly reaches out. She takes his hand, and he lets her. She squeezes, once, and then her hands are moving.

'You can talk to me. I can listen. We're still friends... aren't we?'

'I'm gay.'

Bev blinks, her dark brows drawing tight together in confusion.

Strike three.

'Have you learned that one? Let me spell it out for you: G-A-Y. Are you happy now?'

"I... what?"

Why did he say that?! What is he *doing?* He can't do this. Will drags an exhausted hand down his face, grabbing for the door.

"Wait!" Bev grabs his wrist, holding him in place. "Don't go, I'm sorry. I just... that is *not* what I was expecting you to say. You're— I mean, are you sure?"

That's enough to stop him from fleeing, through sheer bafflement alone. *'What the hell do you mean, "am I sure"? Like have I checked? Is there a test I'm supposed to take?'*

She shrugs, her voice climbing high in defense. "I don't know! I just meant that maybe it's not, you know, definite." A tiny grimace forms on her face. "Because, you know, I really did *think* that I had a thing for Z, but then it turned out to be a lot like kissing my brother. It was weird."

Will rolls his eyes. *'It's definite, Bev. I'm completely, one-hundred percent sure. I like boys. Men. Guys.'*

Bev is silent for a long moment, so long that it makes Will itchy with nerves. Her face is one of deep contemplation.

Then she suddenly groans loudly, burying her face in folded arms over her steering wheel.

"Ohhh my God!" She laments, stretching out her syllables dramatically. "Oh my God, Hannibal fucking Lecter!"

It's the fear, weirdly, that makes him laugh. He's still shaking, every muscle coiled tight with anxiety. It puts his laughter on a hair trigger.

"I'm so stupid, holy shit." And then Bev is laughing too. "Zeller fucking clocked you."

Will is edging on hysteric, now, giggling uncontrollably. It feels more like hiccups than laughter, sharp and unintentional. He wants it to stop, terribly. He thinks he might be sick if it doesn't.

Bev comes up for air, grinning. She sighs in relief. "God, I thought there was stuff going on at home or something. I was way off."

Ah, there's the off switch. Will sobers immediately, turning serious in the blink of an eye. *'You aren't going to tell anyone, right?'* he asks, and he feels himself turn frantic. *'You have to swear that you won't tell anybody. Not even Z. Please.'*

"I won't!" A fresh frown appears on her face. "Is that why you were scared to tell me? Will, being—" She lowers her voice when she says it, scared even though the two of them are enclosed in her car. "Being gay is like a death sentence in this town, I wouldn't out you even if I hated your fucking guts."

Finally, finally, the nerves start to wash away. Will can breathe again. He nods, a sudden exhaustion overcoming him after being so tense.

Bev lightly punches his shoulder. "Hey, you're not off the hook though, okay? I'm serious, you need to split up your attention better. It's not fair that Lecter gets all your time just because he'll give you head and I won't."

Will can *feel* how red his face gets. "H-he's not— we don't— I mean, we haven't—'

Bev is snickering again, and Will rolls his eyes but he's smiling, too.

'I'll do better. And I'm sorry, really. For being so in my head about everything. You... might have had a point, about me being up my own ass, a little.'

She shrugs. "I can be the same way, I guess. I'm um, sorry too. For not giving Lecter a fair shot. And if I made you feel like you had to come out to me before you were ready, just now. I really didn't know."

Will nods in understanding. Bev points at the Diner's entrance, and when he follows the gesture he sees Brian and Jimmy not-so-subtly peering at them through the glass.

"We're being watched," she says. "Do you wanna go back in? Maybe you and Lecter could hang out with us for a bit? I promise I won't let the guys, you know, be themselves with him."

'Sure,' he replies, feeling pleasantly light. *'And for the record, I'm glad that I told you. About... me.'*

Hannibal is watching them when Will and Bev walk back into the Diner, half hunched over his sketchbook. He flashes a tentative smile when his eyes meet Will's, and Will grins back.

It's a bit of a tight squeeze, cramming everyone into the booth. Will ends up smushed between Bev on one side and Hannibal on the other, though he can hardly pretend to be upset about that part of the deal. It's closer than Will would dare sit with Hannibal in public if it was just the two of them.

Bev and the guys start talking around him, and to his immense relief it really doesn't feel like anything has changed.

Gently, Hannibal nudges Will's arm. Will looks back at him. He's just been sketching, not really much for conversation with anyone but Will. With Will, he's been able to speak out loud on a handful of occasions, but he seems hesitant to even sign to other people.

'What's up? You okay?'

'Patroclus,' Hannibal replies.

Will frowns at him. Hannibal shows him the sketch he's been working on.

'For the contest,' he clarifies, gesturing to the drawing. *'Patroclus was the lover of the Greek warrior Achilles.'* He smiles at Will, adorably fond. *'Achilles loved him fiercely. To a fault, some might say.'*

Will grins. God, it's a constant battle not to kiss him. *'Sounds like Patroclus is a lucky guy.'*

Hannibal falters. *'Actually—'*

"Hey, Lecter."

Both boys look across the table. Brian is eying Hannibal's sketchbook curiously.

"You're like, really good at art, huh?"

Hannibal smirks slightly. Will covers his own mouth with his hand, trying to hide how besotted he must look.

Brian leans closer over the table. "Could you draw Rogue from X-men? Like, doing a cool pose or something?"

Will expects Hannibal to decline, to sneer. Hannibal only likes *fine art.* Still Lifes and Portraiture and recreations of famous ancient artworks. Hannibal takes his pencil to a blank page in his sketchbook, quickly writing in a slanted cursive script.

'I would need a photo reference.'

Brian lights up. "I can lend you a comic! There's plenty of pictures of her in those."

"Pages might be stuck together, though," Jimmy quips, and Will chuckles.

"What about, um, that scene in Return of the Jedi? Where Leia's in that bikini costume? Do you think you could do that?"

Jimmy shakes his head. "Don't listen to him, Hannibal." He scoots closer. "You should really draw Sarah Connor, from Terminator."

Brian scoffs. "You *would* say that."

"The hell's that supposed to mean?"

Hannibal goes back to thumbnailing what Will assumes will eventually become himself as Patroclus, but he glances up every few seconds to tune back in on their conversation. Will looks to his other side, giving Bev a hopeless shrug.

"Don't give me that look," she whispers. "This is the closest they're gonna get to playing nice with each other. Enjoy it."

So he takes his friend's advice, for once. He sits back, stops thinking, and listens.

Can't We Be Seventeen?

Chapter Notes

giggles and kicks my feet and twirls my hair

this is all just setup for the NEXT chapter which im SO EXCITED ABOUT!!!!! but this chapter turned out really cute and fun so enjoy uwah

"Will!"

He peers in the direction of her voice through the violent glare. The sun seems to drown the entire parking lot, the asphalt a boiling mass beneath their feat and the blinding sun bouncing off the bodies of every car. Not even May yet, and the heat is enough to make him actually eager to get to the docks every day. At least there, he's able to dip his feet in the water every once in a while, find a little relief.

Margot's wearing her long hair tied back, keeping the weight of it free from her neck and shoulders. He feels a pang of jealousy, watching her ponytail sway as she walks up to him. Maybe he should just give up and let his dad cut his hair off. He'd look stupid, but it would cool him down.

She salutes him with a grin when she finally meets him, sunglasses shielding her from the elements. She has a spiral notebook in hand, already holding it out to him so that he doesn't have to fish through his backpack.

"You're not like, in a crazy rush, are you? Because I really wanted to talk to you about something today, but I − " she leans closer, speaking quietly even though no one is around. "I couldn't talk to you about it at lunch."

That piques his interest. His dad won't notice if he's a handful of minutes later than usual. **'I have a little time.'**

Margot nods sharply, all business. "I'll keep it quick, I promise. You're going to prom next weekend, aren't you?"

Will blinks. He hasn't event *thought* about prom. He knew that it was happening, of course, but prom is one of those things that has always existed in his mind as something that other kids did, like family game nights and slumber parties. Not something that Will himself could ever do.

He shakes his head, and Margot frowns.

"Why not?"

'I just wasn't planning on going.'

Her lips twist slightly, but she bounces back a moment later. "But you aren't opposed to going," she infers.

Will shrugs. **'I guess not.'**

The words are barely written before Margot is smirking up at him.

"I have a proposition for you: Go with me."

His stomach turns. **'You know I think you're really cool and all, Margot, but I thought that we both – "**

She holds up a hand, stopping him in his tracks with a laugh. "No, not like that! It's just that my parents are acting fucking crazy lately. They're getting pretty freaked about the fact that I'm seventeen and still haven't had a boyfriend. I figured that if I told them I had a date for prom, they might chill out until graduation, and then it won't be my problem anymore."

Will hesitates. He's not so sure about the idea of attaching himself romantically to Margot, after the fiasco that had been her party. Then again, as long as he's upfront with Hannibal about it...

'Are you sure that going out with *me* is the best way to make them happy?'

Margot snorts. "Please, they'll be so thrilled to see me standing next to someone with a dick and a pulse that they won't have time to worry about anything else."

He isn't entirely sure he believes that. Playing at being shrewd, he narrows his eyes at her. **'What's in it for me?'**

She plays at being appalled, and it makes him snicker. "Is doing something decent for a friend not motivation enough for you?" Will's shit eating grin in response makes her roll her eyes. "Besides, you don't think it would help grease the wheels with your dad, if he knew you were taking a girl to prom? Freaks like us need all the help we can get. And I know your dad is… strict."

The way Margot hesitates on the final word makes him feel queasy, but she makes a strong case. Margot is rich, beautiful, devastatingly popular – and he's been just as keen to curry some breathing room with his old man as Margot is with her own parents, by the sound of it.

"Come on, Will!" she urges, lightly shaking his shoulder. "All you have to do is show up at my place, smile for a couple of pictures. Then you can spend prom with Lecter, and I can – " she falters, a slight heat creeping onto her face. "You know, I can just cut loose without worrying about my family for a bit."

Ah.

'This is about Alana, isn't it?' he writes. **'You want to take her to the dance.'**

The flush across her face only grows deeper, and she punches his bicep. “Like you’re not even the *least* bit interested in seeing Lecter dressed to the nines, under a bunch of cardboard stars and disco lights while Boyz II Men is blaring in the gym?”

Ah.

‘On second thought, I’m in.’

Margot tosses her head back laughing, knocking her sunglasses askew in the process. Will can’t help but join her. It makes his chest turn tight, imagining Hannibal at a school dance. His dark eyes so soft in the dim light, his strong frame wrapped up so flatteringly in a well-tailored −

Shit.

‘I can’t do it,’ he corrects, palms breaking out in sweat. **I don’t have anything to wear. I’ll look stupid.’**

She sighs in faux irritation, but her red smile is soft and patient. “Okay, first of all: You won’t look stupid, you’re super cute. And I don’t need to tell you that I’m *not* the only person who thinks so.” She lowers her shades to give him a pointed look. “You could show up in a paper bag, and Lecter would still be drooling all over you. Second: We can go to the thrift shop together if you want, there’s tons of cool vintage suits there. I can help you pick one out.”

Will grimaces, the back of his neck now burning from more than the sun and the weight of his hair. **‘I don’t have any money right now,’** he confesses. **‘Like, at all. I’m fucking broke.’**

Margot seems to consider that for a moment, before a wicked smirk forms on her face. “I can get my parents to buy you one,” she offers. “They’d want you to have something that matched my dress, anyway. Otherwise the pictures wont be perfect enough to hang near the fireplace.”

His stomach turns at the idea. He’s never bothered to look at the price tags hanging from new formal wear, but he imagines it’s more than he and his dad spend on groceries in a given month. **‘No, thanks.’**

The Vergers don’t seem to be interested in raising their children to take ‘no’ for an answer, though. “What’s the big deal?” she prods, and Will bristles in much the same way that he does when Hannibal tries to push gifts onto him. “You’ll be taking advantage of a couple of rich, homophobic assholes, *and* getting new threads out of it. It’s a victimless crime!”

She drives a hard bargain. Will is perfectly aware that he’s out of objections. So why is he so hesitant to agree?

… **‘What if Hannibal doesn’t want to go?’** he writes, feeling suddenly sheepish. **‘I don’t want you to feel like you have to babysit me all night.’**

“Oh, Will,” Margot sighs, and he tenses when she affectionately ruffles his hair. “He’s *going* to go, if you ask him to. So. What do you say? Are you down?”

Will leaves her in suspense for a moment, frowning contemplatively at the pages.

‘It’s a date.’

-

"Hand me that screwdriver − No, not that one, the flathead."

Will dutifully rummages in his father's toolbox, standing from where he'd been soaking his calves in the cool water to place it in the man's hand. His dad takes it, but as he does his unkempt brows draw together. He stares up at Will, eyes narrow from the sun or suspicion or both. Will fidgets under the scrutiny, wiping his palms on his rolled jeans self-consciously.

'Eveything okay?' he tries.

"You been gaining weight, Willy?"

It's like a part of him thinks his dad won't be able to see him anymore if he doesn't move. It feels like the blood in his veins stalls in place, and he's sure he turns pale as a sheet.

He's noticed it, too. His arms don't look as bony as they once did, and his cheeks seem fuller than before. Part of him likes the change. He's still small for his age, but six months ago he'd looked downright sickly. He would look in the mirror before a shower, sometimes, and find himself reminded of a creature actor in a monster movie − unnervingly gangly limbs, effortlessly coming across as something alien with only a few prosthetics and some clever tricks of the light. He likes his reflection better, now. Still scrawny, still hiding behind baggy clothes and a curtain of hair, but he looks more like a normal boy than ever. More like a normal boy than he actually feels on the inside, even. Like something alive.

But the changes in his body also scared him shitless. He'd been hoping that his father wouldn't notice, but of course he has. Can't be bothered to actually pay attention to his son, but if Will is hiding something, suddenly the man is observant as hell.

He tries to keep his head. Just because his dad knows that he's gaining weight doesn't mean he'll be able to deduce why it is that Will is eating better lately. He doesn't even know that Hannibal *exists*. It's fine, it'll be fine.

'Am I?' he signs, trying like hell to keep his hands from shaking. He fights the urge to turn on his heel and dive straight into the water. *'I... hadn't noticed.'*

The relief is enough to make him lightheaded when his father chuckles, returning his attention to his work. Will sways on his feet a bit, turning nauseous with anxiety. "I warned you that your metabolism would slow down eventually," his father teases good-naturedly. "Don't worry, you're not gettin' *fat* or anything. You've just finally got some meat on your bones."

Will nods, the sweat across his nape plastering his curls and shirt collar to his skin.

"Relax, it's a good thing! No girl wants to go steady with a beanpole, right?"

Well, he doubts he'll get a better in than that.

'Hey, Dad? Speaking of girls...' He braces himself. *'I actually was wondering if you would be okay with it if I went to prom next weekend?'*

The older man seems to study him once more, as if convinced that he's looking at a stranger. "Are you and your friend going together? What's her name..."

Will shakes his head. *'No, not Bev. Her name is Margot. She's a senior, she's in the school band. She plays the saxophone.'*

"And you wanna ask her out?"

It makes him ill, how entirely his father's demeanor changes. How cautiously optimistic he looks at the very implication that Will might be interested in a girl. It serves his own needs well enough, but he can't help but imagine how his father would react if Will was discussing the person he *actually* wants to take to the dance. He forces himself to swallow the bitterness pooling in his mouth.

'I actually already talked to her about it,' he replies. He's smart enough to know that this will go better if he lies about it being *Margot* who asked *him*. *'She said she wanted to go with me, so I told her that I would check with you and make sure it was okay first. So... is it okay?'*

Will watches his dad suck his teeth, mulling it over. "You said it's next Saturday?"

He nods.

Something odd comes over his face, then. Something almost regretful. Will tries not to overthink it. If he's pulling his old man's heart strings right now, then he's grateful for it. He needs all the help he can get.

"You know what? Sure."

Will blinks. *'Really?'*

"Yeah, what the hell. You can take the truck out and everything. You're a kid, you've gotta act like one sometimes." He looks down at his grease-stained hands, signaling that the conversation is finished. "Now come on, we're burning daylight."

-

Will drums an anxious rhythm on the thighs of his jeans, vibrating with the pace of his own heart. A Spring breeze takes pity on him, cooling his flushed skin and fluttering through the leaves of the tree overhead. Hannibal parks under trees when he can, the blue of his car dark enough that it boils in the Louisiana heat. It meant that the poor vehicle was drowned in pollen for a few weeks, but the worst of that is over now.

He'd practically sprinted here after the final bell, heart in his throat and sweat blooming on his hands as he raced to the far corner of the school parking lot. Now, all he has to do is wait.

Wait, and pray that he doesn't lose his fucking nerve within the next five minutes.

Negotiating with Margot was almost too easy. Talking to his dad? Child's play. *This* is the hard part. The part that he's honestly not sure he'll survive. He feels like he might pass out before Hannibal even gets to his car, hyperventilating himself into cardiac arrest. And for what? There's nothing to be scared of. Nothing at all. Nothing at all.

At least, that's what he's been telling himself on repeat for the past twenty-four hours.

He almost chokes when he sees Hannibal approaching. He could still bolt, Hannibal might be strong but Will is a faster runner. No. That's stupid. Don't be a pussy, Willy. Act like a man.

Hannibal smiles when he sees him. Will nods to him in greeting, leaning on the other boy's car in a way that he knows isn't fucking working. He'd been aiming for that devil-may-care, Jason Dean vibe. Turns out he's a far cry from Christian Slater.

'You're usually running off to the docks by now,' Hannibal notes, ambling to a stop just in front of him.

Will flashes a lopsided smile in return, bathing in Hannibal's attention. All around them, their peers are walking to their cars, their parents' cars, finally escaping for the day. Will can't shake the feeling that Hannibal and himself are the only souls for miles.

'I wanted to ask you something first.'

Hannibal cocks his head in interest, arching a fine brow. Will catches himself tugging anxiously at the hem of his T-shirt, and forces his hands into fists at his sides. *'Should I be worried?'* Hannibal prods, but he looks more charmed by Will's nerves than anything.

Spit it out, Willy. *'No! No, I was just wondering... well, I was thinking about how, you know...'* Come on, stop being stupid. He's your boyfriend. He likes you, you *know* that he likes you, you've had your tongue down his throat for fuck's sake. *'You know how, um, prom is next weekend, and – '*

Hannibal's face breaks into a wide, expectant grin as soon as the dance gets mentioned. He's given himself away already. It should ease his anxiety, but all it does is make his rabbiting heart twist awkwardly, like it's trying to wrestle free from his chest and fly from his dry mouth.

'I mean, I know that we wouldn't even be able to dance with each other, with everyone else watching and everything, but…'

Will bites his lip, forcing himself to look Hannibal in the eye. Fuck it. *'But I want you to go, if you want to go. With me.'*

He's red from the tips of his ears down to his collarbones, he knows it. It only burns hotter when Hannibal laughs. It's a warm, lovely thing, and it makes Will's stomach squirm.

Will feels like he’s dangling from a cliff, the way that Hannibal leaves him hanging. The other boy just smiles, eyes quickly scanning the parking lot as if for a sign. Will is helpless to resist when Hannibal seizes his wrist, dragging him past the car without a word.

He stops near the trunk of the tree, fingers still wrapped tight around Will's arm. Hannibal looks past Will's shoulder, watching. It dawns on Will a moment too late that Hannibal is making sure the tree is between the two of them and the parking lot.

And then his back is meeting tree bark, pressed against the trunk as Hannibal kisses him hard. A stupid, strangled sound flees Will's throat, his hands clumsily rising to cup Hannibal's face. One of Hannibal's palms braces himself against the tree, his other hand curling into the fabric of Wills shirt to pull him even closer.

Will is breathless when they part, the kiss somehow leaving him both dizzy with its intensity and desperate for more. He peeks up from beneath his lowered lashes and finds Hannibal, gazing down at him through shade and dappled light.

It's funny, Will always thought that his own smile sat so awkwardly on his face before Hannibal. An uncomfortable contortion, like his mouth was the wrong size for his face. He beams up at Hannibal anyway. It feels like it fits, right now.

Hannibal darts close, kisses him once more on the cheek before moving near his ear. "Yes," he says, soft and cheerful. The sound of his voice is still so new, it makes the hairs on Will's neck stand on end. *'I'd like that,'* he adds when he pulls away. Fuck, Will is done for.

'Cool. Yeah. I − I'd like it, too,' he signs back, wincing at his own awkwardness before his hands are even finished moving. Yeah, not even in the same zip code as Slater. *'Um, I should probably...'* He gestures vaguely behind them, and Hannibal nods in understanding.

'Go on. I'll see you on Monday, Will. I'm looking forward to the dance.' There's a spark of glee in his face that keeps the words from feeling entirely formal, and Will's body seems to buzz giddily from head to toe.

Licking his lips, he steals one last kiss from Hannibal. *'Bye.'*

There's a spring in his step as he starts across the parking lot, heading for the docks. The sound of Hannibal saying 'yes' is bouncing around in his head, lighting up corners of his skull as it circles the space like a lightning bug in a mason jar. He's counting down the minutes until the dance, eager and nervy all at once. He can't wipe the toothy smile from his face, no matter how hard he tries. Especially not when he notices the feeling of Hannibal's eyes on his back, watching him go.

Sitting in a Sandpit, Life is a Short Trip

Chapter Notes

> AH okay ive been looking forward to this chapter for like. months. its a long one, but i really thought it was better like this rather than being split into two chapters. eee im nervous i hope yall like it!!!! also listen to forever young by alphaville amen

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will is about to pass out.

Margot's house was fine. Scratch that, Margot's house was awful but he was able to tolerate it out of sheer terror of what would come after. He'd been painstakingly careful in his planning, determined not to leave a fucking thing to chance this time. Margot and Han were probably sick of him running through the logistics at lunch, but he couldn't help it. Nothing was going wrong tonight, not if he had a say in the matter.

Obviously telling his father that the Verger's were paying for a suit was out of the question, so he'd left the house in a button down, dark jeans, and the ugliest tie he'd ever seen in his life before making a break for Margot's. After a wardrobe change and the most awkward exchange of small talk he'd ever had, he and Margot moved to the Verger's front yard.

Her parents parked the two of them in front of some immaculately blooming azalea bushes, which Will assumed Mrs. Verger herself had no hand in caring for. Will has always hated having his picture taken, though being drawn by Hannibal so often has made him a bit less self-conscious. It still made him bristle to be directed by Margot's mother − told to stand straighter, smile brighter, hold Margot closer.

Well, it was unlikely that the photos would ever be seen by anyone whose opinion of Will actually mattered, so it was easy enough to shrug off. And the Verger's seemed pleased with his performance, Margot included, so as far as Will was concerned he'd passed the first test of the night with flying colors.

Margot was gracious enough to pick Alana up herself, leaving Will to carry out phase two on his own. And phase two, apparently, begins with Will alone in his dad's truck, sitting outside Hannibal's house, genuinely terrified that he's about to throw up.

He takes a slow, deliberately even breath as he steps out of the vehicle, staring at himself in the driver's side window. He hadn't really worried much about his appearance while he'd been at Margot's, but now he can't stop scanning his reflections for flaws, and he sees *plenty.*

The suit that the Verger's bought is dark grey, and while he's been filling out lately, it's still too loose to look right on his thin frame. The sleeves fall partway over his hands, like he's a

child trying on his father's clothes. His palms start to sweat.

Fumbling, he unfastens the buttons on the suit jacket and pushes the sleeves up to his elbows, rolling the cuffs of his white dress shirt to hold them in place. Is that better? Shit, he should have asked Margot for advice. He's never been any good at this stuff. He tugs nervously at the tie around his neck, deep red to complement Margot's dress, and tries to make it look a bit less like he's about to attend a funeral. It's marginally better, but he still feels like more of a Sissy Spacek than a Molly Ringwald, so to speak.

Frowning at his sunburned face, he pulls Bev's navy hair tie from its usual place around his wrist. Maybe it'll grant him some of the girl's social efficacy, he thinks bitterly as he pulls his hair back. The same rebel strands as always fall free in seconds, framing the left side of his face. He sighs, puffing out his cheeks.

Well, he's looked worse. Not much he can do about it now, anyway.

It takes a couple false starts before Will is able to knock on the front door, its bright red paint almost mocking in the lingering evening sun. His hands clench and release again and again as he waits, heart thumping so violently he's scared he'll end up with bruises.

Robertus smiles when he opens the door. It never stops feeling strange, that Hannibal's uncle is always so pleased to see him. Will always expects it to be the last time, that soon the well of his kindness will at last run dry, and he'll turn Will away.

Not today, it seems.

"Hello, Will," he says, warm but formal as usual. "Hannibal should be down in just a moment, would you like to come in?"

Will licks his lips, fighting the urge to bounce anxiously on his toes as he nods and signs his thanks.

Robertus eyes him for a moment, appraising. Will feels like he might spontaneously combust. Like a shadow in the dark, an almost teasing smile creeps onto the older man's face.

"You seem nervous."

Will swallows, tugging at his tie. *'Do I... do you think I look okay?'* he asks, his neck already turning oppressively hot.

Robertus places a hand on Will's shoulder, his smile turning gentle. "You look very handsome, Will," he replies. An odd look of sadness passes over him, just for a moment, and then it's gone. "Please try to relax and enjoy yourself tonight, won't you? I know it isn't my place to say, but your father... he shouldn't have you work so hard, in my opinion. These are your last years of childhood, after all. There will be plenty of time to work once you're fending for yourself, no?"

Will stares up at him for a moment, searching for a response that just isn't coming. *'Okay,'* he says at last. *'I'll try, thank you.'*

The hand on Will's shoulder squeezes reassuringly, and then Robertus is stepping away. He can still feel its weight, even when it's gone. He's not used to this, he doesn't know if he'll ever *get* used to it. Adults aren't supposed to treat him like this, are they?

"Hannibal! Will is here!" Robertus calls up the stairs, waiting by the banister.

"Coming!"

Hearing that voice inspires a goofy grin, despite Will's unbearable nerves. He pulls awkwardly at his clothes, as if a slight adjustment of his collar would salvage his appearance.

Every worry regarding his outfit leaks from his brain a moment later, though. He doesn't need to worry about anybody looking at him. As far as he's concerned, the only thing in that gym worth seeing will be Hannibal, tonight.

He's devastating. There's no other word for it. It's cosmic, in a way – daring Will's inferior, fragile mind to comprehend it, and consuming him when he predictably falls short. Will blinks, and he can tell by the twinkle in his boyfriend's eyes that he looks as awestruck as he feels.

Hannibal's movements are slow, smooth as he descends the stairs. Basking in the theatrics of it all, no doubt. Fine by Will. He's happy to stand there and just be captivated by him for a few moments.

His suit fits perfectly, accentuating the sharp lines of Hannibal's shoulders, his long legs that somehow never come across as ungainly. He's elegance incarnate, sweeping up to Will in his shiny black shoes. The suit is dark blue. He always looks so, so good in blue.

That pointed smile that never fails to steal his breath away makes its first appearance of the night. First of many, Will hopes. *'You look beautiful,'* Hannibal signs, and Robertus makes a point out of becoming very interested in the fireplace on the opposite wall.

Turning pinker than Mrs. Verger's azaleas, Will fumbles uselessly with his hands. *'You –'* He sighs, waves the first attempt away and tries desperately to make his brain work again. *'You're prefect,"* he confesses after a fashion, not daring to tear his eyes away for fear that Hannibal might vanish before he could look back. *'Have I ever told you that you're perfect?'*

Hannibal blushes, darting close to press a quick kiss to Will's cheek. Will flinches on instinct. He's not used to that, either. The very idea of being physically affectionate with another boy, *in front of someone,* makes him sick. When they're alone, he has no issue with showering Hannibal in as many kisses as he wants. But when someone else can see them...

'We should probably get going, Will signs awkwardly, and tries to make a break for the door.

The sound of his retreat catches Robertus' attention, though. "You're leaving already? I was hoping to take a few photos first, if it's all the same."

Will hopes that his displeasure isn't obvious. He's already undergone that ordeal once today. He's just thankful that his old man isn't the sentimental type. But the Lecters have done more

for him than anyone he knows, so he's happy to endure.

"Will d-doesn't like having his picture taken," Hannibal says, stumbling slightly with the speed of his words, and Will smiles. No, he's only interested in seeing depictions of himself that have been filtered through Hannibal's gaze first.

Robertus nods to Hannibal, pleased. Hannibal had told him in passing that his uncle was insistent on him speaking aloud as often as he felt comfortable trying, and the fact that Hannibal has voiced this seems to be an effective bargaining chip.

"If you're sure," Robertus sighs. "But I think you might wish you had something to remember this by, someday."

Hannibal's lips twist, but but he doesn't reply. Will feels a pang of affection, and sighs.

'I guess you could take a few,' he relents, casting a gentle smile Hannibal's way. *'As long as you don't let anybody see them.'*

Hannibal grins, and when he twines their fingers together, Will tries his best not to flinch away.

-

It's... fine.

Nothing has gone *wrong* yet, at any rate. The music is a little too loud, and the gym is a little too crowded, and his body beneath his suit is a little too hot. But it's all *fine.* Nothing jumps out to attack him, there's no pig's blood raining overhead.

The vision that Margot initially sold him on exceeds his expectations. Will spends long minutes leaning against the gymnasium wall beside Hannibal, their shoulders just barely brushing, savoring the view. The dancing lights overhead soften his features, making his boyfriend look so pretty it should be illegal. He could look at it forever and not get bored.

It sucks that looking is all he can do, that’s all.

Will doesn't imagine he'd be interested in PDA even if he was straight, but it does ache to be so loudly reminded of their circumstances. He didn't think it would bother him, being so near a crowd of couples tonight. It didn't, at first. The event began with a cluster of fast, high energy songs, ones that could be danced to without a partner. Or with many, in his case, when Bev and the guys dragged Hannibal and himself to the dance floor and demanded that they all makes fools of themselves together.

That part had been fun. It was great, actually. Made him feel like a normal kid, engaging in some good, clean fun with his friends. And it was a rare thing to see Hannibal loosening up a little when they weren't alone. It made Will reflect on how much Hannibal had grown since they met, how much brighter he seemed to be. A reflection of the person he'd been before, maybe. Maybe this was what healing looked like.

It filled him with so much affection that he thought he might choke on it, which made it sting all the more when the slow songs started and everyone paired up but Hannibal and himself.

Now they're here, parked awkwardly on the sidelines. Watching dozens of other teens twirl in one another's arms. It's not even that he *wants* to slow dance. At least, not in front of all these people. It just makes him bitter that he can't.

Will sighs through his nose, scanning the crowd. Bev and Jimmy are camped near the punch bowl, hoarding snacks and gossiping. Brian got pulled to the dance floor by some mousey girl from his History class, and now he's tripping over himself as he tries to keep up with her. Margot and Alana are strangely nowhere to be seen, which only lowers his mood further. He almost wishes they'd just stayed home, listened to Etta James in Hannibal's bedroom and left the rest of the world outside where it belonged.

He elbows Hannibal lightly, drawing his eye. *'I'm gonna get some air,'* he signs, pushing himself from the wall. *'I'll be right back.'*

Hannibal fronws. *'Is everything alright?'*

Will smiles in a way that he hopes is reassuring. *'Yeah. It's just, you know, the music. I just need to take five.'*

It's possible that Hannibal would've offered to accompany him, if Will had given him the chance. He really just wants to step away for a moment, though. To shake off his pesky thoughts, so that he can have a good night. He'd earned that, hadn't he? One good night with his boyfriend?

The night air is warm, but nowhere near as oppressive as it is in the gym. Will slumps against the school's exterior, breathing out a long sigh as his palms begin to thump restlessly over his thighs. In the distance, he hears laughter.

Will narrows his eyes, scanning his surroundings. He sees no one. The laughter rises again. Is that... Margot's voice?

His curiosity pulls him to follow the sound, sneaking along the wall. When he rounds the corner of the building, he finds two figures, pressed close near the door of the empty music room. For a moment, all Will can see is a mess of long hair, a pair of thin silhouettes. Then it clicks.

Will places a hand over his mouth to muffle his gasp, staggering awkwardly backward as his face flares red. He stumbles slightly before he can flee, and Margot's head snaps to face him. She grins at him, giddy. The utter lack of fear on her face makes him feel oddly insulted.

"Will, you snuck up on me!"

'You should be glad it was me!' Will signs, eyes flicking between Margot and Alana Bloom, her back against the wall. Their lipstick is smeared, both of them are short of breath. *'Do you not understand how fucked you'd be if it was anyone else?!'*

Margot just gives him an awkward smile. "Sorry, you know I can't − " she gestures to his hands, shaking her head. "Um, are you okay? Are you leaving already?"

Seeing the two of them in this position makes the envy that's been flickering in his chest all night flare wildly, as childish as it is. Margot is supposed to be *like* him, they're supposed to be suffering *together*. Isn't she afraid?

But no, of course she isn't. She's graduating in less than a month, and then she's leaving home and never looking back. Will might not have much to lose, but Margot has nothing that can be taken from her. Not anymore.

Alight with a fresh determination, he leaves the girls to their own devices, their hushed laughter trailing in his wake. He strides back into the gym, head held high with his new purpose.

Hannibal smiles at him, still lingering the same place Will had left him. *'Feeling better?'* he signs.

'Do you want to get out of here?'

The other boy tilts his head. *'So soon? I thought you were looking forward to this.'*

'I was,' he assures, chewing his lower lip. *'But I just thought that maybe we could go somewhere more, you know... private?'*

He's always been a sucker for how Hannibal's eyes light with mischief when he's up to something. *'What did you have in mind?'*

-

The vacant parking lot of the local park might not be the most scenic location, but as Will rounds the truck and opens the passenger side door for Hannibal with a smirk, he finds that it has some charm. It's late enough in the night that the park is completely empty, the truck's headlights casting a glow to see by as Hannibal's feet find the ground.

Will leans into the vehicle, tongue pressed between his teeth as he fiddles with the radio. Eventually he locates a station with a half-decent signal, the voice coming through only slightly disfigured by static as it extols the virtues of 'the best of yesterday and today'. He cranks the volume and lowers the window so that it floats out into the parking lot, then casts Hannibal a victorious grin.

"Pleased with yourself?" Hannibal teases, and Will shrugs in false humility.

'It's better, don't you think? More...' he hesitates, eyes casting out to the abandoned park. *'Intimate.'*

Hannibal chuckles, lowering his head almost bashfully. *'I feel a bit overdressed for this venue.'*

One last scan of the surrounding area, just to be sure that they're completely alone, and Will is closing the space between them. He takes Hannibal's face in both hands, guiding him gently into a slow kiss. Hannibal's arms find their way around Will's waist with practiced ease, urging him to stay near as if Will would ever choose to do otherwise.

Through the crackling white noise, the sound of low synths spills into the lot. Will smiles into their kiss before pulling back.

Let's dance in style, let's dance for a while/
Heaven can wait, we're only watching the skies/

'I don't think I've slow danced like, ever,' he signs, Hannibal watching his hands with growing interest. *'But if you wanted to, I would try. I just can't promise that I won't step on your toes or anything.'*

Hannibal beams at him like Will's just offered him the world. He would, if he could. He'd give up what little he had for Hannibal in a heartbeat.

Hands come once more to rest on Will's waist, and Will lets his arms fall around Hannibal's neck. He tries not to overthink it, to sway wherever Hannibal moves him.

Hoping for the best, but expecting the worst/
Are you gonna drop the bomb or not?/

Will drifts on Hannibal's current, enjoying the novelty, the warmth, the closeness. But Hannibal won't look away from his face, and the attention burns him up inside. He can only bear it for a minute or so before he feels like he's suffocating. Laughing nervously, he pulls away.

"What's wrong?"

He scrubs at the flush on his face, trying to shrug off the swell of anxiety building in him. *'It's just awkward, i don't know.'*

Hannibal furrows his brows. *'Why do you think it's awkward?'*

Will huffs, tugging at his jacket. *'It just is. We can't talk, or anything.'*

'Do we need to talk?'

He erases what little distance Will had carved for himself in one long stride, tucking two fingertips beneath his chin. He coaxes Will to look up at him, and Will melts.

"I'm with you, Will," he whispers. "That's enough."

Will practically leaps into this kiss, chest swelling with emotions that he doesn't feel nearly equipped to articulate. He hides himself away in the shelter of Hannibal's body, wrapping his arms tight around him and tucking his chin over the other boy's shoulder. Hannibal resumes their swaying, slow and gentle as if he were rocking Will to sleep.

Sighing with almost painful bliss, Will turns his gaze outward. Past the parking lot, out to the inky shapes of dormant buildings and the park's vacant footpaths. The sky is clear tonight, scattered with twinkling stars. The moon is bright and full overhead, and as Will looks up at it, he can almost feel it staring back at him.

If he could, he'd put the world at a standstill. Right here, right now. Just Hannibal and himself, with no one to see or judge or pull them apart.

He turns his head to the side, burying his face in the crook of Hannibal's neck. Breathes him in. He smells like clementines. It's soothing. Will hasn't felt this safe since...

Since he woke up in Hannibal's arms, still shy and unsure but undeniably *accepted.* Since Hannibal kissed him near the river and told him that he only wanted Will to be okay. Since he bandaged Hannibal's bleeding hands, sitting on his kitchen counter. Will hugs him tighter, every cell in his body buzzing like a live wire. His nerves are turned on. He hears them like musical instruments. Where there was once silence − the drums, the strings are incurably playing.

They're barely even dancing anymore. Just standing in place, wrapped up in each other while the moon watches on. Hannibal's arms squeeze around him, just for a moment, before Will is stepping back abruptly.

He stares up at Hannibal, electrified from head to toe. He's so, so beautiful.

You did this. Pure genius at work. Darling, the composer has stepped into fire.

'I love you.'

For a moment, Hannibal's face turns completely blank. His dark eyes are wide, stricken shapes, staring back at Will in some tremendous mixture of disbelief and awe. Helpless to do anything else, Will finds himself smiling.

And then he's being scooped up in Hannibal's embrace again, his dress shoes briefly leaving the ground when the other boy lifts him. Will giggles, something he didn't think himself capable of until recently. He sets Will down before absolutely drowning him in kisses, pressed to his cheeks, his jaw, his neck. Will is breathless, laughing and grinning so wide his face starts to ache.

"I love you, too," Hannibal whispers, tender and warm in his ear. Before he can think about it, Will is seizing Hannibal by the lapels of his suit and hauling him into a passionate kiss.

His back finds the body of the truck, and Hannibal pins him there with his body, trading hungry, lovestruck kisses with him as the minutes drag by.

Forever young/
I want to be forever young/
Do you really want to live forever?/
Forever young/

-

Will practically floats through the door when he returns that night, dressed once more in the frumpy outfit he'd left in. He can't wipe the stupid grin off his face no matter how hard he tries, but he reckons there are worse things in the world than looking happy.

His dad is sitting on the sofa, watching an old episode of M*A*S*H with a beer in his hand. Will salutes him, plopping down onto the seat beside him. "How was the dance?" he asks.

'It was good,' Will replies, smiling at nothing in particular. *'It was... yeah, it was really great, actually.'* He and Hannibal spent an hour at the park together, maybe two. They listened to music, walked down the quiet paths together, made out in the truck until Will was hard and delirious. He might've done more, if Hannibal had made a move. He'd been a bit too chicken shit to make one himself. Apparently he's brave tonight but not *that* brave.

"That's good," his dad says, taking a swig. "I'm uh, glad you had fun."

His dad might be absolutely clueless about his own damn son, but Will knows his father better than just about anybody. Still, he can't imagine that it would take an expert to spot the tension in his jaw, the resolute way that he avoids looking anywhere near Will's face.

'Something's wrong.' It isn't a question.

The older man shakes his head, but he still grimaces. "It's good news, Willy. Really. I think you'll see soon that it's good."

That's all it takes. He's done this before, enough times to be able to taste it in the air like static before a storm. Eleven times, to be exact.

Twelve.

'Dad.'

"It's gonna be big for us," he insists quickly. "It's a cushy job, with a big yacht club out East. They're hiring us on for the summer, running maintenance for 'em, but it could turn into something long-term if we play our cards right."

He can feel his heart, settling into the depths of his stomach. His lungs burn, like the air's been knocked from his lungs. No. No, no, *no.*

"That's good, ain’t it? You've been saying that you'd rather have something long-term."

Just that easily, his despair morphs into anger. He’s playing dumb, feigning ignorance when he knows *exactly* what he’s done. *'No, I wanted to stay **here.'***

His father just sighs, less pained and more exasperated. "Look, Willy, I know you're upset right now – "

'Of course I'm upset!' 'Upset' doesn't begin to cover what he's feeling, though. The high he'd been riding has been fully ripped from beneath him, leaving him raw and disoriented and

distraught. He stands, signing furiously at him with only the light of the television to ensure he's heard. *'I've finally found a place where people like me, and now you want me to just leave it behind?'*

His eyes sting, but he pushes it down. His mind swirls, all the same. Moments, memories, faces. Bev, Margot, Hannibal. He's not ready, he *can't* −

'Why? Why do you want me to be fucking miserable?!'

"You're not looking at the big picture!" He sets down his beer on the coffee table with a heavy *thunk,* his emotions climbing to reach for Will's. "It might not seem like it right now, but I'm trying to do what's best for you, alright? That's my job!"

This is what playing nice gets him. This is how it *always* goes between them. *'That's bullshit and you know it, you don't care about what's best for me!'* he signs, face red with indignation. *'You've* ***never*** *given a single shit about what's best for me! If you did, we wouldn't be leaving!'*

Will refuses to step back when his father stands. He's not giving him the satisfaction. He crowds Will, aiming an accusatory finger at his face.

"Talk like that is exactly why we're getting the hell out of this place!"

He narrows his eyes. *'This isn't about your job,'* he signs with disgust. *'You applied there so we'd have to move again!'*

"It's good money, boy!" he argues. "Something you might care about if you were having to earn your place under my roof!"

Will bites his tongue, knowing damn well that he earns it in a dozen different ways. Not that it's worth all the effort to live with him in the first place.

"But no, Willy, it's not just about the job. It's about getting my fucking *son* back!"

It pulls a scoff from him, but the older man continues.

"You've changed since we moved here," his father says. "You're slacking off, you're acting up, you don't *respect* me anymore! The kids at that school, they're poisoning you! I mean, hell, I feel like I don't even know you anymore!"

He sets his jaw. *'You never knew me.'*

He knows it's stupid, picking a fight. Knows that he should just roll over and take it, since fighting back is only going to make it worse. Knowing doesn't stop him.

His father opens his mouth, takes in a sharp breath. Will braces himself − for a threat or a blow, he can't say for sure. The twisted rage on his face seems to signal both.

And then the older man walks past him, stomping for the door. "I'm going to the bar, be in bed when I get back," he grunts, pausing just before the threshold. "We're leaving May ninth, day after school lets out. I'd make my peace with that, if I were you."

Three weeks. Three weeks until he's gone. Until all of this is just a memory, one that he can't possibly hope to hang on to.

Frantic, desperate, he reaches out. He grabs his father's shoulder, flinching reflexively when the older man whips around to face him.

"What?!"

He has to swallow his pride to say it. It doesn't go down smooth. It never does.

'...Please. I can't leave, I − '

I feel like I'm supposed to be here. The words won't come.

'Please.'

He looks down at Will, a fraction of his anger dissipating into simple exhaustion. "You're a good kid, Willy," he sighs. "I *know* you're still a good kid under all the shit they've been putting in your head. All this, it's just a phase. One day, you're gonna look back on this, and you're gonna understand why this was what I had to do."

Will lets go, lips trembling as he struggles not to cry. He watches his father leave. There's nothing left to say.

He turns off the TV, and the room is lit only by the moon outside. Shoulders sagging with the weight of the night, Will pulls a chair from the small dining table up to the window. He presses his temple to the glass, staring up at the moon overhead. If he tries hard enough, he can almost imagine that he's still at the park, staring at the night sky over Hannibal's shoulder.

It doesn't seem to shine so brightly, now.

Chapter End Notes

eheheheehehe

Sorry For Me

Chapter Notes

ohohoho we're cooking with gas now i love you beverly katz i love you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's pretty common knowledge among the modern youth that the American education system is bullshit. Learning is a deeply personal process, but the people on charge are either too stupid to know that or just don't actually give a shit. Which leads to thousands of kids across the country growing up thinking they're stupid, just because they aren't well-suited for the specific learning techniques that schools are made to employ. It's a a crap shoot, a matter of luck rather than actual intelligence.

That said, Will had to get lucky at some point in his life.

So it was that the stars aligned in his favor, where academia is concerned. Will's a good test taker, memorizes things easily, has a decent grasp on logic and problem solving. He's a smart kid, at least by the state's definition. Life might take some sadistic satisfaction out of making his existence a living hell, but Will has never struggled in school.

So, when a one Beverly Katz asked him to help her study for her final exams, Will hadn't seen any reason to question her motives.

Now, though.

"Do you think Luke Perry is hot?"

Will looks up from his History notes, eyeing his friend with a cocked brow. Bev is sitting on her bed beside him, legs crossed beneath her, a magazine open in her lap. Her notebooks are scattered over her purple blanket, but none of them have been so much as touched in at least half an hour. Bev looks back at him, and his lips pull into a smirk.

'I don't know.'

Bev rolls her eyes. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

Will sets his notes aside, finally catching on. Right, the two of them are only 'studying' when Bev's mother peeks in through the gap in her bedroom door.

Mrs. Katz had been very clear about that gap, too, which Bev obviously found very annoying. She'd groaned dramatically, insisting that they were 'just friends, Mom' before ushering Will into her room as quickly as she could.

Bev scoots closer, holding out the magazine and pointing to a photo. "Look at this picture, tell me what you think. I'm trying to figure out your type."

He observes the man in the picture for a moment, a wry grin forming on his face. He's about to reply when the door swings fully open.

"Hey!" Bev shouts, sitting up straight. The intruder is a girl, about twelve, with long dark hair like Bev's. Her little sister, Hannah. "I told you to stay the hell out until Will left, go away!"

Hannah puts a hand on her hip, glaring at Bev. "I'm just getting my Gameboy, I don't care about your stupid boyfriend."

"I already told you, he's not my boyfriend!" Bev hisses.

When Hannah storms out, she slams the door behind her, and Mrs. Katz immediately shouts down the hall for Bev to leave it open. Bev lets out a long, heavy sigh, moving to crack it again and casting a rueful glare at the second bed on the other side of the room. Will can't help but enjoy watching Bev bicker with her family, even if they're driving her up the wall. It's nice.

"Bullshit," she mutters, flopping back onto the bed beside him. "I'm sixteen, I should have my own room."

Will bites his tongue. He's trying to be more sympathetic, to learn from his mistakes, but it's grating to hear her take things for granted. Informing her that she should be glad that she *has* a room won't make either of them feel any better, though.

Bev stares at her ceiling, blowing a lock of hair out of her face only to have it fall in the exact same spot. "Five more months," she mutters.

He tilts his head. *'Until what?'*

"My mom said I could have Lia's room when she leaves for college," Bev replies. She lowers her voice, shooting him a conspiratory glance. "It's like, smaller than this one, but it has its own bathroom. Can you imagine? I bet Hannibal doesn't even have his own bathroom, and he's loaded."

Will shakes his head. *'No, I cant.'*

Bev's life isn't perfect, either. Not that he was ever under the impression that it was. The second oldest in a family with five children, Bev doesn't seem to have a thing that is hers and hers alone. It's all shared, or it was Lia's once, or it will be Hannah's when Bev doesn't need it anymore. It's awful, but a bitter part of Will enjoys seeing her struggles. It's not that Will doesn't want her to be happy. At least, he hopes that isn't why. It's just... reassuring, in a way. It makes him feel like his own worries aren't so isolating, after all.

She snatches the forgotten issue of *seventeen* from where it had been abandoned on the bedspread, thumbing through it with a pensive expression. "And then in a year, I can finally kiss this fucking place goodbye."

That pill is a bit harder for Will to swallow. He sucks his teeth. *'Trust me, you could have it a lot worse.'*

Her answering laugh is lacking any humor. "You didn't grow up here," she argues. "Nothing happens in this town, you know? Nothing changes. I've been talking shit and loitering with Jimmy and Z since I was in braces, Will, and they're my best friends but I can feel it sucking the life out of me."

He tries to hide how it aches, imagining the life that Beverly can no longer stand. Days passing by, completely uneventful, leaving him to focus on school and killing time with his friends. Will doesn't dare to let himself dream of stability often. He knows damn well that it's not in the cards for him. Still, the idea of having that kind of consistency, forging those kinds of bonds...

"Everything's gonna be different when I graduate," Bev continues. "I'm gonna get away from it all, start over." Her mouth twists. "I've never felt like I could try something new, not really. Everyone here is so judgey."

'It's like that everywhere,' he assures her, and she just shrugs.

"Freddie Lounds is telling everybody that I called her a slut," she grumbles, fetching a blue pen from her pile of supplies and doodling a pair of sunglasses onto Luke Perry's face. "I don't even *think* about her, why would I spread rumors about her?" She shakes her head. "It's all so stupid."

'I'm sorry.'

Bev seems to study him for a moment, her dark eyes flitting over his face. "I'm mostly just pissed at myself," she confesses.

Will frowns at her. *'For what?'*

"For giving a shit," she scoffs. "Like, why do I fucking care if people at school think I'm a bitch? I *hate* most of those kids, and the ones I like wouldn't believe it anyway."

Will leans back against her wall, observing the room. The clothes in the sisters' closet are intermingled, Bev's dark jeans hanging right beside a lime green shirt with a ladybug on the front.

"I wish I was more like you, Will."

He huffs. *'No, you really don't.'*

"I do! You don't care what anybody thinks of you."

'Why do people keep saying that?'

Will pushes his hair out of his face, his skin turning warm with the first flickers of anger. *'Of course I care what people think of me. Everybody does!'*

Bev sighs, scooting closer to him. "You know what I mean. You don't try to change for anybody. You're just... you."

'I don't really have much of a choice,' he notes, looking back at her with an almost apologetic expression. *'I tried, for a while. I thought that maybe if I acted like everyone else, then people would just... ignore the parts of me that didn't fit.'* He shrugs, flashing a sad smile. *'I'm not very good at masking. It didn't help me, I felt worse than ever. I figured that if I was going to be a freak either way, I'd rather be a freak who does all the stuff he likes to do than one who's alone* ***and*** *bored.'*

Will freezes up when Bev leans sideways, resting her head on his shoulder. Hannibal's done wonders for his skittishness when it comes to physical touch, but it still has a tendency to spook him. Still, he doesn't flinch away.

"I'm sorry," she says softly. "People are the worst."

He shakes his head, aware of the weight on his arm as he signs *'Not all of them.*

Bev breathes out a light, self-deprecating laugh. "I just feel like a coward, I guess. Like I'm weak for wanting their approval. Maybe I am."

Will knows the feeling. Very well. *'If you're a coward, then I'm a coward, too,'* he replies. *'Why do you think I sat at Alana's lunch table, or went to Margot's stupid party? Hell, I've spent the past sixteen years trying to get my Dad –'*

He stops in his tracks. A great lump forms in his throat, and he coughs hard in an attempt to dislodge it. Bev lifts her head, frowning up at him.

"You okay?"

He nods, waving his hand to clear his own words from the room. *'You can't make somebody like you. That's all I mean. No matter what you do. And I...'* He takes a labored breath. *'I think I'm starting to get sick of trying. I think I'm tired.'*

"Then I don't think you're a coward either, Will," she says with a gentle smile. "In fact, I think you're pretty brave."

Christ, it's like the room is getting smaller. *'I don't feel very brave, lately.'*

Bev watches his hands. She sees how his fingers have started to tremble. He's crumbling.

"...Will?"

'I have to tell you something.'

She nods, her brows knitted tight. The air has turned serious. Will braces himself, tries to conjure a way to say this that won't be torture. Nothing comes.

'I'm moving, after school lets out for the year.'

The change in her expression is subtle, really. A blink, her eyes widening by a fraction, a wobble in her lip. Will experiences every detail like a physical blow.

"What?"

'I'm sorry,' he tries. It doesn't help.

When she speaks, there's a thickness in her voice that he's never had to hear before. Guilt stabs up his spine, shooting all the way to his skull. "I mean, I guess I knew that you wouldn't... Where are you going? I-If it's not far, then maybe we could..."

Will bites hard on the inside of his lip, blinking through a thin haze of wet. A bitterness overtakes him, makes the movements of his hands aggressive and graceless. *'I'll be spending the Summer in Myrtle Beach, fixing rich asshole's yachts with my Dad.'* He sniffs sharply, glaring at the stack of CDs on Beverly's nightstand as if they were somehow to blame.

'I tried to tell him that I wanted to stay, but he didn't want to hear it. I keep thinking that I should've made him listen, but I was − He chuckles, bitter and waterlogged. *'I was too scared, just like always.'*

He's prepared for Bev to go back on her words from before, to say that Will is a coward, after all. Or worse, for her to pity him. Poor Will, too spineless to make things better. At least, he's trying to be prepared.

What he isn't prepared for, though, is Bev flinging her arms around him. She hugs him tight, the position of their bodies awkward where they'd been sitting. His chin tucks itself over her shoulder almost automatically, his arms knowing how to return the embrace despite his brain being no help at all.

"I'm gonna miss you so fucking much," Bev whispers, and then she's sobbing.

The feeling of her shoulders shuddering beneath his hands breaks him. Hot tears roll down his cheeks, and he clutches at the back of her shirt.

Bev speaks into his sleeve, her voice wavering. "It's not gonna be the same without you, you know? Me and the guys − " She pulls away abruptly, staring up at him with a horrified look in her reddened eyes. "Oh my God. Hannibal. How did he take it, is he okay?"

Will swallows, scrubbing roughly at his tear-stained face. He turns his head away. He can't bring himself to look at her, he's too ashamed. Hiding, again. Is he ever going to find the strength to stop hiding?

"Will," she says, and it's more a plea than an accusation.

'I still have two weeks to tell him,' he defends, like that makes a difference. He wouldn't feel so rotten about it if it did.

"You're not going to wait until the last minute, are you?"

Will winces. She sounds scandalized. Worse still, he can feel her disappointment in him radiating in waves. It's mutual.

"...Are you?"

He sighs, the back of his skull hitting her wall again with a weak *thunk. 'Maybe, I don't know. I've been thinking that it might be better if I didn't say anything at all.'*

She stares a him for a moment, disbelieving, before she says "You're joking."

Will levels a serious look her way. Beverly laughs harshly.

"That's insane, Will."

'Is it? Neither of us can do anything about it, anyway. All it would do is make the next two weeks fucking miserable.'

"And how do you think he'll feel, when you leave?" she demands. She's angry, impassioned at his boyfriend's plight. It turns his shame acrid, rolling and sickly in his guts. "No goodbye, no 'I'm sorry', you're just *gone.* How are *you* gonna feel? Shit, Will, is that really how you want to leave things with him?"

Will scowls at her. *'Why do you care? You and Hannibal aren't even friends.'*

"I care because *you're* my friend, dumbass! I care because I know you, and I − " Bev glances at her cracked door, leans closer and half-whispers to him. "And I know that you love that weirdo. If you go through with this stupid, self-pitying idea, you're gonna regret it until the day you die."

He sighs, looking to his hands almost sheepishly. *'...I feel guilty,'* he confesses after a moment. *'I mean, I knew that I wouldn't be staying long when I came here. I knew it was going to go like this. If I really cared about Han − '* He glances up at her. Bev's face is still flushed, her eyes a bit swollen. *'If I really cared about **you,** then I wouldn't have tried to be your friend in the first place.'*

The two of them marinate in the silence that follows. Will hugs his knees to his chest, fresh tears welling in his eyes. Beverly just watches.

"Do you wanna know something, Will?"

He stares back at her, waiting.

She takes a deep, weary breath. "It is going to *suck* when you leave."

His teeth sink into his lower lip. *'I'm sorry.'*

"I might not even celebrate school being out," she continues, doubling down. "I'll just... rent *Evil Dead 2* and cry."

Will sniffles, a tear rolling down his nose. *'I love that stupid movie.'*

Bev smiles sadly. "Hannibal's not gonna get out of bed for a week. A-And there's gonna be like, a shrine of drawings of you as dead Greek guys in his room."

'Am I meant to be feeling worse or better right now?'

She doesn't laugh it off. "It's gonna suck," she repeats. "But I really, really love being your friend. And I'm still going to love being your friend, even when you're four states away. And I bet if you asked Hannibal, he would say that knowing you was worth every single second of it sucking when you leave."

Will tries to smile, but his lips tremble. *'You mean that?'*

"Absolutely," she insists. "I mean, do you know how many times I saw Hannibal Lecter *smiling* before you came to town? You make people's lives better, Will, you can't just refuse to let people love you and then call it noble. It's not fair."

He falls into her arms. It feels like the only thing he can do, with his chest swelling so painfully tight. Bev cradles him close, patting his back reassuringly. It's bittersweet. Knowing that there are people in his life that don't see him as a burden, knowing that soon they'll be hundreds of miles away. He decides that he'd rather have it bittersweet than not have it at all.

The sound of timid knocking on the door makes them both jump. Bev whips around, glaring at the interruption. "What?!" she barks. There's a little boy peeking through the door. One of Bev's younger brothers. He looks scared shitless.

"M-Mom just wanted to know if your friend was staying for dinner," he says, eyes wide behind his glasses as they dart between Bev and Will. "Sorry."

Bev puffs out her cheeks when her brother skitters back down the hall, rubbing her face wearily. "I know you can't stay, I won't make you say no."

He smiles at her. *'Thanks.'*

"Tell Hannibal," she says, soft but firm, and places a hand on his shoulder. "Soon?"

Will nods, resigned, but the idea still makes him nauseated. *'I'm scared.'*

Beverly shrugs helplessly. Her eyes still glisten with unshed tears, but she’s grinning at him. “We’re all scared.”

Chapter End Notes

me braced for chapter 30 after being threatened within an inch of my LIFE after posting ch28..... well, it was nice knowing yall

Landslide

Chapter Notes

> HHHH idk i fought with this chapter for like 5 days and ive been brain rotten over succession and i was really struggling with these scenes but i THINK im mostly happy with the chapter now????? groans idk i hope yall like it idk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'I took my love, I took it down.
I climbed a mountain and I turned around.

"Ah, I love this song. Keep playing, darling."

Will glances sidelong at Hannibal. He's lying back on their picnic blanket, one arm draped across his eyes to shield him from the rays of sunlight peeking through the trees. His sketchbook sits ignored and open on his lap. A pencil hangs from his fingers. He's smiling to himself. He’s beautiful.

'And I saw my reflection in the snow-covered hills,'

Hannibal hums, blindly reaching out and placing a hand on Will's knee. "You play so beautifully, do you know that? I could just lie here and listen to you for hours."

Will doesn't bother trying to smile. Hannibal can't see him, anyway. He just lets his fingers pluck at the strings of his guitar, cradled in his lap. Tries to memorize the details of the boy beside him. The shade of his hair, the dip of his cupid’s bow, the shape of his hands. They feel familiar beyond study to him, in this moment, but he commits himself to it regardless.

'Til the landslide brought me down.'

They're at the river again. The water sparkles in the afternoon sun, almost coaxing. ‘Come on, Will,’ it whispers. ‘Let yourself have this. Be happy, while you still can.’ He's trying, God knows he’s trying.

Hannibal breathes out a gentle laugh. "My mother never let me listen to this song in front of her," he says, fondness creeping into his voice. "She said that it always made her cry."

Will just nods, trying to ground himself in the motions of his hands.

'Well I've been afraid of – '

"Something's on your mind."

He fumbles, sounds falling away into nothing. Hannibal moves his arm to peer up at him, squinting hard into the sun. "You've been lost in your thoughts all afternoon. What is it, Will?"

Will shifts, curling slightly over his guitar as if to hide it from harm. His arms drape over the instrument, his eyes resolutely fixed on the water moving before them. *'It's nothing,'* he replies.

"You're lying."

*'I'm **fine.**'* He is lying. He doesn't even know why he's lying.

Hannibal sits up, giving Will a hard look. It makes Will feel like shit, but not enough like shit to break him. "Is it… you would tell me if it was your – "

'Not everything is about my father, Han.' What is he doing? He's hostile, he knows he's being hostile. He brought Hannibal here so that they could talk, hadn't he? So that he could tell Hannibal the truth?

"You can tell me," he urges tenderly. So kind, so *loving,* why does he always have to be so loving? Why does he have to make this so hard? "Whatever it is, we can work through it together."

'God, can't you just fucking back off?!'

Will huffs, tearing his fingers through the unruly mass of his hair in the humidity. Summer is approaching, fast. Too fast. Even so, the air feels thicker than usual. *'There's just… there is no 'working through it together' this time, okay? There's nothing you can do.'*

Hannibal lets them both hang, suspended in the silence Will has carved, for a handful of minutes. His voice is tender, when he finally speaks again. More disappointed than angry, like a school teacher. "…Why do you do this?" he asks at last. "Why do you *always* do this?"

Will has nothing to say for himself. *'I'm beginning to think it's pathological.'* It's meant to be a joke, maybe. Neither of them laugh.

Hannibal shakes his head. He takes one of Will's hands in his own, squeezing. "You don't need to hide, Will. Not with me. You know that."

'I do,' he signs, but it doesn't change the fact that he's terrified. *'I know.'*

"Then what do I need to do?" Hannibal moves closer. Will hesitates as he sets the guitar gingerly aside. He feels suddenly naked without it. Disarmed. "Is this how it will always be, between us? You telling lies, and I politely pretending to believe them?"

Will bites hard at the inside of his lip. Unable to look Hannibal in the face, he scans the flowing river for answers that might have gotten picked up by the current. *'No. Not always.'*

Hannibal sighs. His shoulders sag. "You're lashing out because you're afraid. I understand that. I do. Would you like to tell me, now, what you're so scared of? Or would you like to lie,

again?”

They look at each other for a moment. Will feels his eyes start to sting with the first threat of tears, and it hits him with a wave of frustration. It’s not fair, that’s what the voice in his head has been screaming for the past few weeks. It’s not fucking fair.

Beneath that, too, there is another voice. One that sounds uncomfortably familiar. That voice whispers that if Will had just kept his head down, none of this would be happening. If he’d been more polite, or submissive, or discreet. Maybe his father would’ve let them stay. Maybe this is all his fault.

‘Do you remember when you asked me what I loved about horror?’

“Will,” Hannibal scoffs, running a weary hand down his face. “Yes,” he bites a moment later. “You called it ‘impolite’.”

Will nods, trying hard to keep looking past Hannibal rather than at him. He’s hanging on by a thread as it is. *‘What I meant was ‘indiscriminate,’ I think. In a horror story, nobody’s safe. Widows, virgins, children. The only ‘safe’ that exists is ‘safe for now’.’*

Hannibal has every right to just get up and leave right now. He doesn’t. He’s a dog too loyal to be driven away. “You’re comforted by tragedy.”

‘I’m comforted by metamorphosis,’ he corrects. *‘Even in the stories with happy endings, ones where the ghosts are expelled from the house and nobody dies − they were still haunted. They still won’t ever be the same again. Their lives are divided, now. Forever. Before and After, for better or worse.’*

Will sniffs, tears finally welling over as he looks Hannibal in the eyes.

‘I think… I think I’m in the After, now. You’ll haunt me, Hannibal. Wherever I go.’

Something overcomes him. A softness. A fear. He laughs and it’s a glimmer of sun on water. “You say that I’ve changed you, the way you’ve changed me. I can only hope it’s for the better.”

It pulls a despairing smile from Will. Hot tracks of wet roll down his face. *‘I guess only time will tell,’* he signs with trembling hands. *‘What was it your man Tennyson said? Better to have loved and lost and all that?’*

Hannibal nods. The motion is robotic, it plays on a loop for several seconds. They’re both crying, now. “How long have you known?”

Something about this, about discussing it in the open − it reeks of finality. Carves their ending in stone and then places the stone at the head of his grave. *'Dad told me after the dance,'* he replies. *'Guess he wanted me to have one more good night before he ruined my fucking life.'*

"Why did you wait so long?"

It sparks anger in his gut, but his body is all wet branches. *'Jesus, Hannibal, why do you think?'* He takes a breath, rakes his hands through his hair. His back finds bark, collapsing against the sweet gum tree. *'Because I hate goodbyes? Because I love you? Because I don't want to spend the last days we've got together being mutually fucking miserable? Pick your favorite, I don't know.'*

Hannibal seems at a loss for words. He turns from Will, jaw clenched tight.

'Han.'

In the brightness of the afternoon, the tears on Hannibal's face have nowhere to hide. He sniffs. He doesn't sob.

Will sighs, nudges the other boy's shoulder. *'Hey, talk to me.'*

Hannibal gnaws on his lip, thinks it over, leaves him dangling.

'Just tell me what you're thinking, please? I've kind of been freaking out about this conversation in my head for like two weeks, so – '

"Can you make a promise for me, Will?" he asks, and the waver present in the word 'promise' makes Will realize that he's never had to hear Hannibal's voice so thick with tears before.

He nods. Without hesitation, he nods. *'Anything. Of course.'*

Hannibal's answering smile makes his heart ache. He looks nearly apologetic, fiddling with their blanket when he croaks "Promise me..."

He breaks before he can finish that thought. He covers his mouth with the back of his hand, features crumbling. Will isn't sure what to do. He wants, badly, to squeeze him tight and kiss his tears away. To drown him in love. He scoots closer, takes Hannibal's face in his hands. Hannibal sobs softly when Will moves to brush the dampness from his cheeks with broad sweeps of his thumbs. Hannibal's mouth opens, closes. He lifts his hands.

'Promise me that you won't forget me,' he signs, his voice crushed beneath the weight of his grief. *'When you're gone, promise me that I'll haunt you still.'*

Will huffs, guiding him closer and pressing their foreheads together for a long, lingering moment. *'You don't even need to ask,'* he replies. *'I've never loved anybody like I love you, Han, I couldn't forget you if I wanted to.'*

The force of Hannibal's embrace pushes the wind from him, nearly tackling him to the ground. He buries his face in the crook of Will's neck, nuzzling at him like he can force Will's skin to permanently absorb his scent.

"I'll never forget you, either," he promises, his words a muffled rumble on Will's throat. Will holds him close, chin tucked over the crown of his head, and watches the river pass them by.

-

The next week is painful. Will goes to class, takes his tests, goes to work. They'll send his final grades along to his next destination, when August rolls around. He imagines he did well but not amazing.

He drags his feet in the parking lot on Friday. They all do.

Alana cries first. Margot follows, and from there it's a free-for-all. He's suffocated when Bev, Jimmy and Brian all fold him into a group hug, but he doesn't push them away. If anyone other than Will notices Hannibal, turning his face from the group and scrubbing roughly at his face, they're all too polite to say so. The only dry eye is Will, and it takes some serious strength to keep it that way.

It's… sad. It's not climactic. There are no last-minute heroics, no third-act twists. No one shows up on Will's doorstep to whisk him away that night. Again, Will is left to contemplate the unfairness of it all. Again, he struggles to escape the feeling that he's brought this upon himself. Again, he aches for a comfort that he knows he won't be given.

Will is awake, frowning at the dormant blackness of the TV screen. He isn't restless. He doesn't toss or turn. He lies, still, staring.

It's past midnight, now. In less than twelve hours, he'll be gone, leaving nothing but a handful of poems and his beating heart behind. It's awful. It's a kind of heartbreak he's never had to endure, and worse still it's exactly what his dad wants. For Will to put his head down, say 'yes sir', not fight back.

Alone at last, left to stew in his own frustrations for hours on end, his anger finally catches light.

Like a death row inmate demanding his last meal, Will stands from the couch. He takes a breath, spares one fleeting glance toward the shut door of the bedroom, and then he's grabbing the keys to the pickup truck.

-

He's not thinking, as he drives across the sleeping town that has become more like a home to him than any place on Earth. He won't let himself imagine consequences, or envision the future. All he allows himself to know is here, now. He isn't gone tonight, he's still *alive* tonight. If never again, then tonight.

He parks on the side of the road, strides across the plush lawn. His system is ruined with adrenaline, all pounding heart and sweating palms as he approaches the house.

Scaling the tree near Hannibal's window is something of a tall order, as sure as Will is that he'd appreciate the theatrics of the maneuver. His bedroom is dark tonight, but Will doesn't believe that Hannibal is sleeping.

He's proven right when Hannibal peers through his curtains on the second pebble. He barely spares a glance before he's gone, and Will moves eagerly to wait by the front door.

"Will," Hannibal whispers when the door swings open. His voice is scolding. His face is overjoyed. "Sneaking here in the dead of night, for old times' sake?"

Will just steals a kiss. Several. Hannibal sighs into his mouth, blissful and warm. Will walks them over the threshold, his mouth never leaving Hannibal's as he nudges the front door quietly closed.

"Your Father might notice that you've stolen his truck," Hannibal pulls away to mutter, and Will simply huffs and presses his lips to Hannibal's once more. *"Again."*

Will smiles into the kiss, his pulse fluttering madly. His hands find Hannibal's shoulders, then drift downward. He feels rough, worn flannel beneath his palms.

Hannibal groans softly when Will sucks on his lower lip for a moment before retreating, both of them short of breath and wide-eyed.

'You're wearing my shirt,' Will notes with a grin, tugging at the blue and black flannel he'd given Hannibal on the night of Margot's party.

Hannibal smiles back, his eyes lowering almost bashfully. "I wear it to bed," he confesses, and Will's heart soars up into his throat. "It helps me sleep. And… I was thinking of you."

'Yeah?' Will crowds him again, planting kisses over the flesh of his jaw, his throat, the space behind his ear. Hannibal tips his head back, his breaths hitching.

"Of course," he sighs, and his fingers curl into Will's hair. "I'm helpless to think of anything else."

Will nudges at his jaw with the tip of his nose, biting his own lip as he pulls back to look up at Hannibal. His hands are anxious as he signs, fumbling and blurring in his haste to get the question out.

'Do you wanna take me upstairs?'

Hannibal blinks. He looks Will up and down, scanning him in the dark of the foyer as if re-familiarizing himself with the body before him. The body being offered. "Will..." It's low. Husky. Will feels a jolt in his stomach at the sound.

'That's why I came here,' he adds suddenly, then cringes. *'And, um, to see you, obviously. I wanted to... to see you one more time, before − but, also for... this.'* Will swallows, hard. Nervous, he tucks his hair behind one ear. Hannibal tracks the movement of his fingers like a bloodhound. *'If you want this. Me. I mean, if you − fuck, Hannibal, just put me out of my misery, please?'*

And Hannibal certainly obliges. His mouth crashes into Will's less than a second later, hot and forceful and decidedly wanting, before half-dragging Will out of the foyer and toward the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

anyway who's feeling normal tonight because IM certainly not

i think you guys are gonna like the next chapter ehehehehe

The Amber of this Moment

Chapter Notes

> say it with me folks: this chapter turned out sadder than i initially intended!!! what else is new haha
>
> uh so there's teen sex in this chapter but its not graphic at all so i wouldnt call it porn or anything. that said if you'd still prefer to skip it theres a scene break after the sex part is over so you can just read the second half of the chapter <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He trips over himself when he lands in Hannibal's bed. He'd tripped over himself already, stumbling blindly up the stairs and nearly falling because he was too stubborn or stupid or desperate to stop touching Hannibal for the seconds it would take to get to the other boy's bedroom in one piece.

Hannibal just chuckles, moving to loom over him like a vampire about to feed. He smiles, braced on his palm with one knee slotted between Will's legs, and reaches out with gentle fingers to brush the shroud of unruly hair from Will's face.

Will realizes that his mouth is hanging slightly open, gawping up at him like a fish in the darkness. He can't help it. It seems impossible that Hannibal can carry himself with such incredible grace. He's mystified, especially because his own body seems more clumsy than ever before. Will has always been ungainly, a little unsure of how to pilot the wrecked vessel of his bones. Suddenly it's like it's his first day wearing new flesh. Like the monster's brain has been carelessly plugged into a new corpse, and now its arms are a little longer than they were, and it hasn't had the chance to relearn its proprioception.

Hannibal's touch trails, soft as a breeze, over Will's cheek. Finds his jaw. Guides him into a kiss. It's slow, ardent. "Breathe," Hannibal whispers against his lips, and reminds Will's heart to beat.

Zing. A resurrection.

It's hot in this room. It's a Louisiana Summer, it's hot everywhere for miles in every direction. Will is shivering.

The spell over him breaks when he starts moving again. Hannibal, for all of his sway on Will's soul, can only keep him calm tonight for so long. He's awkward as he undresses, kicking and shoving his way out of his clothes like he's never had to take them off before. Hannibal seems to find it endearing enough, though Will doesn't find much relief in that fact. Luckily, it becomes increasingly difficult to feel self-conscious. Or to think about anything at all, really. His brain stops behaving like a brain the second that Hannibal touches him.

'Sorry,' is the first thing that he thinks to say, because he can't shake the feeling that it needs saying. There's no follow-up, though. What can he say? 'I've never done this before?' They both know that. And either way it's a rotten excuse. It's Hannibal's first time, too, and he's nowhere near as hopeless as Will. *'I... have no idea what I'm doing.'*

Hannibal just sighs. Pulls him closer. Kisses his mouth, his throat, his collarbone. He takes Will's hand, guides it to touch him in return. "Relax," he says, but Will's hand shakes against heated skin. "It's just me."

And some delirious, lovesick part of him wants to scoff at that. To say 'There is no *"just* you," not to me'. But it's true, at the same time. He's never needed to second guess himself with Hannibal. He's safe here. It's okay, this time, to be a little bit clueless.

Hannibal's lips find his bony, heaving chest. An embarrassing, half-formed sound gets pushed from him. It isn't the only time.

Little is said, after that. Even less than that is coherent. Hannibal says 'Is this alright?' and Will nods. Hannibal says 'Can I touch you, here?' and Will pulls his own hands away just long enough to sign *'Please.'* Hannibal says 'Does that feel good? Like this?' and Will lets out a hitching moan that startles both of them.

Many times, Hannibal says his name. Will can only hope Hannibal understands that he's calling out to him in return. He's heard his own voice before. Little glimpses, anyway, like notes from a song left half-written. He's heard himself laugh. Heard himself sob. Heard the awful strangled syllables that his father wrenches from him, from time to time. It feels right, that these sounds should live only in Hannibal's head. He can have them.

Will presses his forehead to Hannibal's, sweat against sweat. Hard, like he could break straight through, gasps of wet air passed between them. Hannibal grabs the damp curls at the base of Will's skull, groans into his mouth, kisses him so fiercely that it hurts. It's the only time Hannibal's love has ever bruised him. It's the only time Will's ever loved the ache.

-

"You look so beautiful when you're falling asleep."

Will stirs. He hadn't realized that he was dozing off. In fact, he'd been trying to stay as alert as possible. He doesn't want to *blink* tonight.

His eyelids are heavy, though. He'd ended up curled close to Hannibal's chest, once again, the other boy's gentle fingers petting through his hair. Their legs are tangled, their skin sticking together in the heat of the night. Will doesn't want to leave.

He bites hard at the inside of his cheek, staring past Hannibal's torso as he struggles to blink away a rising tide of tears. He doesn't want to leave.

"Will? Are you alright?"

Will sniffs sharply. He's *not* going to cry, not now. It's not how he wants to leave things. He sits up, mustering a smile when he turns and looks down at Hannibal.

'Recite something for me.'

Hannibal smiles back. He takes one of Will's hands, tracing the knobs of his knuckles, the lines of his palms. When he speaks, it's low and soft. His eyes are locked on Will's hand, his head lowered in something like deference or devotion. Shy.

"...What is more beautiful than night, and someone in your arms?" he begins. His voice cracks a little, tear-thick, wavering. "That's what we love about art. It seems to prefer us, and stays."

He brings Will's hand to his lips, kisses his knuckles. Lines of poetry become hums against his skin, Hannibal's mouth drifting up Will's arm, his recitation like a prayer until he's whispering in Will's ear. " − a blanket of aspirations," Hannibal breathes, and pulls back just enough to look Will in the eyes. He cups his face with his palms, cradles him like something delicate. His eyes glisten with tears and Will's heart swells painfully.

"Blue. For once not a melancholy color. Because it is looking back at us."

His lips brush Will's. It's easy, almost casual.

'This is good.'

Hannibal stops, the breath he'd taken in before the next line of the poem sits stagnant in his mouth. Almost awkwardly, he says "It is."

Will huffs at his own inelegance, fumbling to string his feelings together. He's caught between his determination to avoid overthinking and his desire to say this properly. Now it's his brain, more so than his body, that feels unfit for its task. Maybe no part of him was ever suited for any of this.

'I mean. I'm glad that I came here. I'm glad that this happened.'

That makes him smile. A warm, loving kind of smile. "So am I."

Again, there are tears in his eyes. Again, he fights them. *'Every single second. Even this part. Even the goodbye.'*

Hannibal kisses his cheek. Will shuts his eyes tight. He doesn't know if he'll find the strength to open them again. "I know."

He tries to breathe. Tries to calm himself. *'...It's late.'*

"You should get some sleep," Hannibal replies, but his forehead falls to rest on Will's bare shoulder.

Will shakes his head. There's a tightness in his throat, now. It's choking him.

“You can’t hide forever, Will,” he whispers. His voice is strained. Both of them are trying to stay strong for the other. “…I’d let you, if you could.”

‘I can’t leave you.’

Will almost grabs him when Hannibal moves away, standing abruptly. It feels impossible to breathe, now. He’s drowning himself.

“Let me show you something, before you go.”

Will frowns. He watches Hannibal as he moves through the room, anticipation like a second weight on his ribs. Hannibal turns on a lamp, opens his closet, pulls a small, weathered box from within.

“Uncle sold most of my family’s things, after their… passing,” he explains as he sits beside Will on the bed. He opens the box, searching inside. “Some things I kept, though. A few of my father’s shirts, one of Mischa’s stuffed toys. And my mother’s jewelry box.”

Hannibal finds what he’s looking for, then. It’s a necklace. A simple chain, adorned with a single pendant. Will leans close, peering at it in the dim lamplight. The pendant is small, roughly the size and shape of a river-smooth pebble. It’s a deep, warm brown, like thick honey. The color of Hannibal’s eyes when the sun hits him just so.

“This is Baltic Amber,” he says, letting the necklace sway back and forth a little in his grasp. “My mother kept it with her, when she and my father moved to America. She said that it made her feel close to Lithuania when she was homesick.”

He looks into Will’s eyes. It’s too intense for Will to shy away, even if he wanted to. He’s pinned in place.

“I want you to have it, Will.”

Will blinks. He leans backward, putting distance between himself and this precious thing. *‘That’s… no. No. I can’t let you do that. Really. I mean, that’s very sweet, but I’ve told you before, I don’t like gifts.’*

Hannibal doesn’t falter. He holds the necklace closer, urging. “Take it,” he insists. “Keep it with you, and when you feel lost let it remind you where your heart belongs.”

He isn’t built to take this. He’s waterlogged. *‘You’ve given me too much already, Han. More than you know.’*

“Please.”

Will looks back at him. Hannibal has always been a serious person, but there’s a severity in his face right now that still manages to be foreign. He’s never looked so sure.

What can he do? He licks his lips, reaches up, pulls his long curls to one side and exposes his neck.

Hannibal's fingers ghost over his nape as he fastens the clasp, the cool amber almost uncomfortable where it settles against his chest. Will places his hand over the stone, pressing it fast against his heart.

'I won't let anything happen to it,' he signs, and his hands are shaking once again. *'I promise, I'll take good care of it.'*

"I know you that you will," Hannibal replies, and flashes a sad smile. "Just as you have always cared for me."

Will sighs. The necklace is a soothing weight. A subtle but ever-present reminder of this moment, this town, this *life.* A home, for as briefly as he'd had it.

'I love you, Hannibal. I really do.'

He hopes this image will be burned into his memory for as long as he lives. May he one day lie on his death bed and recall, with perfect clarity, Hannibal Lecter. Hannibal Lecter with his oddity, and his honesty, and his love. His light and his darkness and the broken, mending places where they overlap. Fuck, he doesn't want to go.

Hannibal takes him in his arms. Holds him tight, kisses his curls, breathes him in.

"I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

okay everybody say bye bye to han!!! are you waving bye bye? no? you're mad that i'm taking the story in this direction? damn.

seriously though i cannot stress enough that this is NOT THE ENDING i SWEAR i have PLANS and OUTLINES and INTENTIONS nobody panic sd;lfjhlsdjf;

i hope yall liked this chapter tho lol it was really out of my comfort zone because i didnt want to do a fade-to-black sex scene but ive also never written a sex scene that wasnt like. SMUT you know. so i hope i split the difference well!

Ain't Gotta be Alone to Feel Lonely

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I'm gonna get off at this exit, I need to take a leak."

Will doesn't acknowledge him. His temple has been glued to the passenger's side window of the truck for hours now, his eyes drifting dispassionately over the landscape as they put more and more miles between Hannibal and himself.

"Might stop at a drive-thru or something, too, I'm starving. You hungry, Willy?"

He lifts one shoulder, lets it fall again. He is hungry, but he doesn't want to eat. The tall grass on the edge of the highway blows from side to side as cars blur past. Will feels an odd pang of sympathy, watching them. What an awful existence, constantly buffeted by forces beyond your control. The grass didn't ask to be grown where it is, it just wants to be left alone.

"You sure? I'll get you some chicken nuggets and a coke, just in case you change your mind."

He's been doing this all morning. Will had told him when they set out, not long after sunrise, that he didn't get much sleep last night. He'd been hoping that would be enough to keep his father from breathing down his neck, and then maybe he could try to take a nap in the truck. He wasn't terribly optimistic that sleep would be finding him, either way, but he would've liked to try.

Instead his dad seems hellbent on needling at him for the entire nine-hundred mile voyage. It's grating, and Will is too exhausted and heartbroken to put much effort into feigning cheer. Why should he? His dad knows how badly he's hurting Will by doing this, he's not going to pretend to be happy just for the man's benefit.

The truck jolts slightly when they pull into a parking spot at a truck stop, and his dad huffs sharply.

"So is this just how things are going to be, now?" he asks, his voice dry with irritation. "You just gonna sit and mope forever? Not even gonna *try* to make the best of things?"

He shuts his eyes tightly for just a moment, swallowing his feelings before he turns.

'I'm just tired, Dad,' he signs. *'I'm sure I'll… feel better after I've gotten some sleep. That's all.'* He knows that no amount of sleep will actually fix what's wrong, but at least he's better at hiding his feelings when he's well rested.

The older man studies him for a moment. Taking in his appearance, Will imagines − the dark circles beneath his eyes, the weary heaviness of his posture. Evidently it's convincing, because he backs off slightly. "Alright," he says, softer. "That's good."

Will nods, giving him what can't possibly be a believable smile.

"Because I don't wanna be stuck working with somebody who chooses to be miserable all the damn time."

Another nod, hands balling into fists. Of course, his dad sees it as Will *choosing* to be unhappy. Everything is always a matter of choice with him, it's unbearable. Sad? Just decide to be happy. Strange? Choose to be normal. Will often wonders why his father wouldn't simply *decide* to be happier himself, if it's so easy. Maybe that gift is only Will's to wield.

He steps out of the truck, then, leaving Will on his own. The moment the truck stop's door closes behind him, Will deflates. He lets his skull fall back against the headrest, blowing out a long, forceful breath. Not enough hours down, too many hours to go. All he wants in all the world is to be alone, but that'll be a long time coming. He hopes that the place they're staying in won't be as cramped as the last one had been. His dad's been even less forthcoming with details about it than usual, though in all fairness Will hasn't been asking. He'd spent the past few weeks trying to think as little as possible about the move. In reality, he'd been thinking about it constantly, but he had been trying. He has no idea what's awaiting him in South Carolina. All he really knows is what *won't* be there.

Will glances at the entrance through the rear view mirror, checking anxiously to make sure his dad isn't about to appear. Nothing. Slowly, he pulls the golden chain from the pocket of his blue jeans.

It's too dangerous to wear Hannibal's necklace, even under his clothes. He wants to, wants the reassuring weight against his heart at all times, but all it would take is one glimpse of the chain peeking from beneath his collar and it would all be over. No, it's smarter to keep it in his pocket. Smarter still not to have it at all, but he couldn't bear to refuse Hannibal last night. More than that, he selfishly wanted to have it. Even if it's risky, it's a risk he wants to take.

He runs his thumb over its surface, back and forth. The pendant is smooth, cool to the touch. Rubbing it soothes him, he finds. Partially because the action is grounding in and of itself, partially because it serves as a reminder. It's only been a matter of hours since he was last held in Hannibal's arms, and yet a part of him is already doubting everything. There's a voice in his head, quiet for now, whispering that nothing between them was ever real. That Hannibal never really loved him, that it was all some wonderful dream that he now must wake from.

All of those doubts melt away when he holds the necklace in his hands. Hannibal wouldn't have given him this, something so personal, so significant, if it wasn't real. Hannibal loves him. None of it was in his head. Their love is real, it's with him, it's not going anywhere.

Will takes a deep breath. Looks at himself in the rear view mirror. Gripping the pendant tightly, he forces a smile onto his face. It doesn't sit quite right. It's not the right shape. There's something almost uncanny about it, more horrific to his eyes than anything else. It's good enough to get him through the rest of the trip though, he thinks.

It'll have to be.

-

There's two bedrooms.

Will stands in the threshold, his duffle bag of clothes still hanging in his grip, staring. Not a pullout couch, not a second bed in the master bedroom. A *second* bedroom, with storage, and its own window, and a door.

His first thought is that they've accidentally entered the wrong apartment. That the woman downstairs must have given them the wrong key, and that any moment now she'll knock on the door and inform then that their room was actually apartment three-one-four, not four-one-three. He stares for a few more seconds. The knock doesn't come.

"What's up?"

Will starts at the sound of his father's voice behind him, spinning to find the older man giving him a crooked grin. The bag falls the last few inches from Will's fist to the floor with a thud.

'There's another bedroom.'

His dad looks pleased with himself. "Sure is. Deposit on this place was a motherfucker, but we'll be able to afford rent once my paychecks start coming in. Told you this job was gonna be big for us."

Will checks over his shoulder, like he's expecting the tiny room to have disappeared while he wasn't looking. *'And it's… it's for me? I mean, it's my room?'*

"Well, I'm not gonna be using it," the older man jokes. He nudges Will with an elbow. "You're turning seventeen in a couple months, Willy. You're almost a man. You need a space that's yours."

…This isn't right. He tenses, waiting for the catch. He's been telling his father exactly that for nearly a year, now, why is he suddenly agreeing?

Maybe this is a test. Maybe when he tries to enter, his dad will punish him. Will narrows his eyes, unmoving. The older man's smile turns to a scowl in an instant.

"What, you don't like it?" he demands. "Christ, kid, I thought you'd be excited! Look, sleep on the couch and feel sorry for yourself if that's what you want to do − "

Shit, wrong answer. *'No! No, I − I am excited, really!'* Come on, bring out the fake smile, once more with feeling. Like you're at school picture day, Will, say fucking cheese! *'I love it, Dad.'* Say it. **Say it.** *'Thank you.'*

Again, his mood spins on a dime. Will's neck is starting to ache from the whiplash. "That's more like it," he says, and ruffles Will's hair. "Need to cut that hair," he mutters as he brushes past, and shuts the bathroom door behind him. A few moments later, Will hears the shower start.

It takes another minute or two to make himself cross the threshold into the bedroom – *his* bedroom. He's still waiting for an anvil to drop on his head and crush him flat as a pancake. He's still trying to work out what invisible strings are attached to this. He still feels like accepting any kindness from his father will look less like survival and more like surrender.

He sighs. Shoves his hand into his pocket. Rubs his thumb over the chunk of Baltic Amber once more. The stone is far from home. Will is quickly becoming acquainted with the feeling.

There's nothing to lose, either way. Nothing that can be taken.

He drags his clothes into the bedroom first, then his backpack and his guitar. The duffle gets carelessly tossed into the tiny closet, the guitar gingerly placed in the corner. He pulls his journal and a few mostly-usable notebooks from his backpack and opens the drawer on the wooden nightstand. It's empty, which is strange to him. He's used to finding a bible inside. He stashes all of his writing supplies in the nightstand, then lets himself crash onto the narrow bed.

It's not much. It's small, and barren, and the blanket is unbearably itchy. He's almost ashamed of how glad he is to get it. Will's not sure if his dad actually meant what he said, or if this is some attempt at placating him. If maybe his old man thought a room of his own would be enough to make him blindly obedient again. Hell, maybe he really did feel bad about separating Will from his friends, at least a little. It doesn't matter, either way. He has his own room.

He's still fully clothed, down to his shoes. It's still early in the evening, and he hasn't eaten a thing today, and the longing that he suspects won't ever truly leave him is fast approaching. The weariness wins out over all these things. Before he knows it, Will is asleep.

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It's dark outside, when he wakes. The apartment is silent. His dad must be asleep. Toeing off his shoes, he creeps into the living room.

He's starving, but there's no food in the kitchen. He doesn't even bother checking. He would have woken up if his father left to get groceries, and from the sound of it they'll be roughing it more than ever until he gets his first paycheck, anyway.

Will pads over to the TV. There's no guide that he can see in the darkened room, so he'll have to just hope he gets lucky.

That half-second of sound after he turns the TV on still makes his heart race, his fingers sweating as he mashes the mute button. The world still feels like it's getting smaller and smaller as the minutes pass. He's still hungry, still tired, still alone. The only difference is that he doesn't enjoy the solitude, this time.

Will feels like he's changed, since meeting Hannibal Lecter. For the better. He's stronger, now. More loving, more honest. He sees evidence of it every day. He *knows* he's changed.

How, then has he still ended up in the exact same place?

Chapter End Notes

You miss him already, don't you? Yeah me too :(

It kills me that i refuse to leave Will's POV so just know that Hannibal Lecter spent this day hiding under the covers listening to sad music in bed and robertus tried to make him his favorite soup to cheer him up but he said he wasnt hungry <3 okay bye ilysm

Killing Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't always like this.

When Will was a kid, things were better. Or maybe they weren't, and he just hadn't realized they were bad yet. Ignorance is a powerful painkiller like that. They were still transient, Will was still lonely and alienated and afraid.

Not when he was with Dad, though. There was a time that Will would've said his dad was his best friend in the whole world. He'd crawl into the truck after school, kick off shoes that were a size too small because he was growing too fast to keep up, and ride with his dad to whatever boatyard they were working in that month with a big grin on his face. He was still too small to help in any real capacity, back then, but he would do what he could. Hold flashlights, and pass him tools, and fetch him a cold beer from their cooler when the sun was beaming down on them. Will felt real proud of himself, too. He'd nearly burst with it whenever Dad would ruffle his hair, telling a client or a neighbor things like *"Willy's a hard worker. Smart, too— you should see the size of the books he's readin'. He's my little buddy, ain't you, Willy?"*

And then Will got older. He changed, or his old man changed, or both of them did. And somewhere along the way, Will looked up and realized that he wasn't Dad's little buddy anymore.

It wasn't something that happened all at once. There's no single breaking point that Will can point to, no moment to blame it on. What he does have is years and years of little injustices, a frozen lake etched with a million hairline cracks. Sometimes he'll find one that's been there for ages, some buried memory that he didn't dwell on at the time but makes him sick with grief to recall.

Worst of all is the fact that he doesn't *hate* his father. At least, not all of him. It'd be easier if he did, easier to reconcile all of the things that have happened between them. How is he meant to view a man who learned a language with him, *for him,* but is disgusted whenever he uses it? How is he supposed to feel about the only constant presence in his life, the person who makes him feel more broken than anyone in the world?

It's harder to swallow than ever, here. School won't be back in session for another three months, there's more work to do than there has been anywhere else. He's stuck to his father's side, all day long. Wilting under his constant scrutiny.

More than anything in the whole world, Will longs to be alone. If he can't go back home, then he wants to be alone. Pretending that everything is fine is killing him, all he wants to do is hide himself away from the world of the living and decompose in peace.

That isn't an option, though.

Will wakes up late, again. It's Saturday, but it feels like an exact carbon copy of Friday, and Monday, and the Saturday before it. He doesn't have time to hunt for breakfast before they head out, so he crawls into the truck beside his father and they drive to work.

The work is tiring in ways that it hadn't been before. Some product of sleeplessness and his lack of appetite, he guesses. He feels like he's got cinder blocks tied to his extremities, like even walking from the docks to the truck is a grueling task. They go home. They pull dinner together— their cupboards are still in a pretty pathetic state, but his dad assures him that they'll get better groceries next paycheck, now that the rent's squared away. Will pecks at his meal, sits through an episode of *Family Feud* with his father, tries to avoid being swallowed up by the emptiness of it all.

He's scared to shut the door to his bedroom. It frustrates him, but it's true. By all rights he *should* be getting all the use out of it that he can. Something about it makes him panic every time he grips the knob, though.

Having the door closed looks suspicious, he reasons. Like he's hiding something, doing something he isn't meant to be doing. And what if it makes his father mad? Will can almost hear him, now, calling him 'ungrateful' for locking himself away. No, the door stays open. He kills time until his dad goes to bed, and then he digs the amber necklace from beneath his mattress and allows himself to hold it for a little while. Rubbing his thumb over its surface, staring at the night sky outside his window until his eyelids start to turn heavy. He always makes sure to stash it away again before he falls asleep.

And so on, and so on. For most of May.

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His days off are almost more stressful than when he's working. Ordinarily he lives for Sundays, but Will's at a bit of a loss for what he's meant to do with himself, in this new reality. He can't stay in the apartment, can't sit with his father and just wait for the delicate peace between them to snap under their feet. It would drive him mad.

Will does what he always does. He makes a trip to the nearest library. He wanders aimlessly among shelves, running his fingertips over new and old spines. Nothing jumps out at him, though. Listless, he plucks a copy of a book he's already read from the shelf and flips through its pages.

It would be better, he thinks, to find something new. Something to stimulate him, fill the hours that now stretch out in front of him without any reprieve in sight. It might help the time pass, might keep him sane. Then again, Ellison said that madness was better than clarity, when faced with eternity. Luckier, to lose one's mind after countless years inside his apocalyptic computer. *"I will say the word 'now'. Now. It took me ten months to say 'now'. I had thought that AM hated me before. I was wrong."*

He sighs, places the book back with its brothers on the shelf. No, he's not going mad. Like it or not, he's going to be present for every monotonous moment of this never-ending Summer.

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Above all else, Myrtle Beach is a tourist trap. It's a beach town, with all of the gift shops and arcades and bikini-clad college kids that entails. Not the best place to spend your days if your pockets are perpetually empty, but at least the view is free.

Will takes his shoes off where the grass gives way to sand, carries them as he strides out onto the beach. He slings his guitar around from where it's been resting on his back, sits down not far from the water.

Looking down at the defined slope of the sand, where the waves have licked at the earth and changed its shape, he thinks of Bev. Bev, who wanted nothing more than to get far away from her hometown. She'd joked a few times, toward the end, that she was jealous of Will for this. Lamented that she'd never been further than a three-hour drive from the hospital she was born in. Grinning, even with tears in her eyes, she'd told him to *"Enjoy being a beach bum, asshole,"* during their last conversation.

At the time, he'd rolled his eyes. Maybe he'd reminded her that she'd be out of Louisiana in a year, maybe he'd just told her to fuck off. Now, he's wishing he'd told her that he would've brought her with him if he could. She knew, of course, that Will didn't want to leave. But he wishes that Bev could be next to him, sitting on the beach with saltwater in her hair and a bad sunburn on her shoulders.

Will plucks at the guitar, staring out at the water. The B string is out of tune, he tightens it, strums a chord to check that it sounds mostly correct.

It's grounding, when his fingers start dancing over notes. At first they're abstract, drifting things, but after a while they gather themselves into a familiar pattern of their own accord. *'And it ain't no use to sit and wonder why, babe, it'll never do somehow.'*

An old Bob Dylan song, one he'd known since his hands were too little to spread over the frets. It's comforting. Just distracting enough to keep his thoughts from spiraling, not so demanding that his mind has to do any actual work. Once it's finished he lets his hands flow as they like, moving from song to song in a disjointed arrangement. Afraid to dwell anywhere for long.

Will's dad is the one who taught him to play the guitar, too. Feels like he's known it since he was born, but he can dredge up wrinkled memories of it if he tries. Dad, placing Will's clumsy hands in the right places, pressing down his fingers against the strings. He'd shook his head, signed *'It hurts.'* The metal bit into his fingertips, still delicate and baby soft.

Dad had just taken Will's hand in his own, guided it back to the neck of the instrument. "It only hurts because you just started," he'd said. "Pretty soon you'll get thicker skin, and then you won't feel a thing."

Will tears his eyes away from the infinite expanse of the ocean, frowning at his still-playing hands as if they aren't his own. His old man was right, in the end. At least about this. The callouses on his fingers are thick, numb things, built from years and years of experience. It doesn't hurt, not right now. Will's not sure if he feels anything at all.

He sinks readily into it, plays every song he knows and half of the songs he doesn't. It feels good, throwing himself into something like this. Maybe tomorrow he'll try to learn a new song, something a little more complex. Might be good to fall headfirst into practicing. Satisfying without being as draining as work has been.

As he plays, Will tries to clear his head as much as he can. He chases away the thoughts that keep creeping in, rising and falling like the waves before him. Memories of clever, gentle hands. Curious dark eyes and soft lips and a low voice that's still a little unsure about speaking. Will never did get to hear him sing.

Will's teeth sink into his lower lip, and he plays until his hands ache and the sun has left its angry mark on his scalp. Beach-goers weave around him, in pairs and in groups. Some of them glance his way as they walk by, one of them even hoots out a passing drunken *'Whoop!'* He doesn't fully recognize the attention, though, until a shadow falls over his body. A figure, standing patiently in front of him.

He looks up, squinting into the afternoon light. The stranger blocks the sun, their face cast in darkness. "Take it," they urge.

Will follows the stranger's arm down to his hand, a single five dollar bill held between their forefinger and thumb. He stares at it dumbly for a moment, then back at the stranger's face. Slowly, like he's expecting it to be snatched away at any moment, he takes the money.

His patron nods, stepping back. "Rock on," he mutters, and then he's gone, trekking up the beach with a young woman in tow.

Will's grip tightens, tightens, until he's crushing the bill in his fist. Instantly, his thoughts begin to run from him, sprinting off into the sunlight. Maybe this is his way out. Maybe he could become one of those street musicians, save up tips from vacationing tourists every Sunday, until—

He sighs, cradles his forehead in the palm of one sore hand. No, that's nothing. Will's learned his lesson, where that's concerned. Saving up money is just a guarantee that it'll get taken eventually. Making plans, dreaming of some shiny approaching future, *hoping*— he needs to get past these things to survive. That's always been his goal, hasn't it? Just keep his head down and make it to eighteen? It's back to the basics, now. No more risks.

Still, he's got this money in his hand. He's not about to just throw it away. If he can't save it, he might as well spend it.

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In the end, he decided to use the money on something a bit stupid. He justified it to himself by saying that it would be too dangerous to buy anything with the intention of *keeping* it, so it had to be something fleeting. Consumable.

And yeah, maybe he should've swung for something a little more fun, like a movie ticket or a handful of arcade tokens, but in the moment it was the only thing that he could think about.

Ice cream. Rich and sweet and melting faster than he could eat it under the oppressive Summer sun. He'd bought two scoops of butter pecan with his hard-earned cash, shoved the change into the tip jar, and eaten it on a bench near the boardwalk.

It isn't until he brings the first plastic spoonful to his lips that he realizes how badly he needed it. Something swells in him, tender and raw like a scraped knee. It's silly, maybe. An incredibly temporary sedative for a problem that feels increasingly permanent. But it feels like it does something to soothe the ache, at least a little. Pressing ice and milk and sugar into the weeping, open void at the pit of his stomach.

It may not have always been like this, but this is how it is now. He can't do anything to fix it. Can't close the hole inside of himself, can't erase the weary numbness in his chest or ease the heavy longing that's only getting harder to carry with every passing day.

But this helps. Not that much, not in a way that makes any real difference in the grand scheme of things. It's still something, though. Something that he does for himself. A moment of control, a landmark he can shove into the featureless landscape of his life and say *This is mine.*

He feels a little better, dragging his body up the three flights of stairs to the apartment. The sun is going down, the day is nearly over. He's successfully advanced through the hours with relative ease.

His dad is in the kitchen, his body half-hidden by the fridge as he searches deep inside for some unseen item. "Hey, Willy," he calls when he hears the door open.

Will shrugs his guitar down from its place over his shoulder, sets it in the corner of his room. The back of his T-shirt sticks to his back where its weight had been, makes him realize that he's been sweating all day. He needs a shower.

"What'd you do today?"

Irrationally, the first thought Will has is that his father has found out about the ice cream. He probably wouldn't care if he did, if Will was thinking logically. It was five bucks, five bucks that Will undeniably *earned.* Even so, his gut reaction is to guard himself.

'Nothing,' he signs, watching his dad's face for cues. *'Went to the beach. Played my guitar.'*

He nods, evidently approving. "I was thinking: Maybe after dinner we could go back down and try to do some crab hunting? Nighttime's the best time to catch 'em, you know."

All Will really wants to do is hose off, shovel some food into his body, and try his best to sleep through the night, but he'd rather not rock the boat. Besides, this is at least an activity that Will would theoretically enjoy. It feels like his father is making some sort of an effort with him. It's too fucking little and *way* too fucking late, but it's better than getting into a fight.

Will sighs, forces a small smile. *'Sure. That sounds… sounds like fun, Dad. I'm gonna take a shower before we eat, yeah? It was hot out today.'*

For a moment he thinks he's in the clear, but his dad's voice stops him just before he can open the bathroom door.

"Hey."

He looks back. His father fixes him with a hard look. Studying him.

"...You okay, Willy?"

Will freezes. He tries to search for some secret, hidden meaning to the question, but after a moment he comes up empty. This is just concern, or as close as his old man can stand to get to it.

The worst part is that deep down, Will *wants* to tell the truth. He wants, terribly, to have the sort of relationship with his father that would allow for telling the truth. Even if he could just wrap his arms around his father, find some comfort there, say something barely-honest like *"I miss my friends, Dad. I'm lonely."*

But that's not the way things are, not anymore.

'I haven't been sleeping well,' he answers instead. It's still not technically a lie, but it's pretty far from the truth. *'I think I got too used to the couch at the old place, I'm not used to the bed yet.'*

There's an extra beat before his dad replies, like he's not quite sure what to say. Will holds his breath.

"Well, hopefully tonight will get you good and tired, huh? Go on, I'll fix us somethin' to eat."

Will just nods, and shuts himself inside.

The water is a little hotter here than it was back home. The pressure's a bit better. He might've spent all day in the sun, but the steaming droplets feel like heaven as they hit his shoulder blades. He tips his head back, sighs to himself. The water soaks his hair, burns a little on his sunburned skin, trickles down his wincing face. It's the only time he feels truly alone, these days. He's finally able to let the thin mask he wears slip from his face.

Will's shoulders fall, sinking under an unseen weight. He scrubs at his face with a wet palm, braces an elbow against the shower wall, hides in the crook of his arm. The sound of falling water fills the small space, splatters against the shower walls.

If he cried, no one would hear it. No one would ever know. He imagines it would help, to cry. Might make him feel better, or at least tire him out. It's like something's closed up inside of him, though. He tries to force it— plays through every fight he's ever had with his father, every night he's spent praying that things could change. He pictures Hannibal's face. Nothing.

He stares hard at the shower wall, straining his unblinking eyes, and all it does is give him a headache.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Thanks so much for reading!

If you're someone who's been following this story, and has been missing it since i randomly put it on hold, i would like to say thank you for coming back to it and also sorry that i made you wait for so long. I don't normally like. talk about personal shit on ao3 outside of projecting onto fictional characters but uh tldr I'm currently in the process of ending an eight year relationship. And at the time i didn't think that it was keeping me from LE, I kept saying i was 'just too busy' to work on it, but I think I just... wasn't ready to return to this headspace with all of that going on. But I'm ready now. And i cannot express how happy i am to be writing LE again <3

So with that in mind, hopefully we'll return to the realm of semi-regular updates (both for this story AND my long spacedogs fic that has also been on pause which im hoping to update really soon!)

Fixer-Upper

Chapter Notes

> full disclosure this chapter is really just a preamble to chapter 35, a chapter ive been looking forward to for nearly a year now. so. idk i feel like its kinda weak but hey it happens to the best of us

No matter how much he might bitch about it, Will still *likes* his job. He'd like it more if he got paid for it, of course, and the heat can be especially cruel, and he doesn't really get how his father can stand to interact with half their clients. But the work itself is actually tolerable.

There's something almost cathartic about working on machines. They just... make sense, in a way that most things don't. An engine is a finite thing, intentionally made. The only trick is in identifying the problem, from there the solution is generally pretty obvious. And there's an understood method for the solution, a preexisting set of steps that Will can follow to get the result he wants.

It’s rewarding. Very few boats are lost causes, in the end. Most of them don't need to be scraped or replaced. Their inner workings can be repaired, salvaged, it's all *fixable.* It’s an empowering thing, leaving something better than you found it.

Will scoots back and wipes at his sweat-soaked brow. His hair sticks to his face, pins itself to the back of his neck, hangs limply around him like a wet wedding veil. He blows out a long breath, rolls some of the stiffness from his shoulders. Squinting through the blazing afternoon sun, Will turns his eye further up the dock.

His father's been talking with a client for a long while, now. Longer than he'd normally want to. She doesn't look like their usual customers, either— not a man in the throes of a mid-life crisis or the matriarch of a big, outdoorsy family. There's something sleek about her, her tall heels and pencil skirt decidedly out of place.

She catches him looking at her, gesturing in his direction. Will watches her mouth moving with a suspicious frown. His dad turns toward him, waves him over, calling his name across the dock.

His wariness only deepens as he stands, wiping stray grease onto the legs of his shorts before approaching. Will's dad never wants him to interact with their clients, why would he? When Will was a kid, he'd parade him around a bit for their customers, sure. Playing up that 'family business' angle for them, plucking at their heartstrings by talking about his little son's disability. That routine doesn't have the same punch as it used to, though, thank God.

So Will's not sure what to be braced for when he comes to stand at his father's side. He claps Will on the shoulder with a smile, jostling him a little for good measure. "There he is," he says, and nods in Will's direction. "Doc, this is my son, Will. Will, I want you to meet Doctor Du Maurier."

Will offers the woman a tight smile, brings two fingers to his temple, salutes. Doctor Du Maurier simply observes him, oozing haughty detachment all the while. Instinctively, it makes Will bristle.

"Your father tells me that you're Nonverbal," she says. Her voice is tight, like she's trying to hold her jaw as still as possible while speaking.

He narrows his eyes at her, nods. Doctor Du Maurier's head tips to the side a fraction.

"That must be difficult for you."

Will's lip curls into a sarcastic smirk at that. *'I think it's easy enough, actually. It's everybody else that wants to make it difficult,'* he signs in reply.

His father's grip on his shoulder tightens like a vice, but he forces a thin chuckle for their client. "Doctor Du Maurier's a speech therapist," he explains, fingertips digging into Will's muscles. "Isn't that interesting?"

She must be able to sense that Will's answer won't be something she wants to hear, because she doesn't wait for it. "Maybe not to everyone. The process can be slow. Boring, even. But the final results are generally worth the effort. You can relate to that, can't you, Mister Graham?"

The older man laughs again, louder than he normally would. Will doesn't disguise how off-putting he finds it. "Hey, we don't call it a labor of love for nothing, right?"

Will rolls his eyes. He squirms, wriggling his way from beneath his father's arm. *'Can I go back to work now?'*

The look on his dad's face is a familiar one. He wants to yell, but doesn't want to do it in public. Some petulant scrap of Will finds the expression satisfying, even if it always spells trouble for his future. "Yeah," he huffs, waving Will off as he speaks. "Go on, I'll be back in just a minute. I wanna talk to our client about somethin'."

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There's a tension lingering between them, for the rest of the day. There's *always* fucking tension, but this time it's a fresh breed. It comes in the form of words loitering in his father's mouth, all unhappily directionless. They give Will the sense that he's working on borrowed time, leave him waiting all afternoon for the shoe to drop.

It finally does, just before sundown. Will is on the sofa, strumming his guitar to fill the silence, when his father suddenly speaks.

"Doctor Du Maurier seemed nice, don't you think?"

He tries to sound casual, but the hairs on Will's arms rise on end. His fingers stutter over strings, an abrupt confusion of notes humming out into nothing. *'I guess,'* he signs.

The older man nods. "Knows her shit, too. She told me she's been helping people learn how to speak for nearly a decade. Not just fixing stutters and lisps, either. She's worked with people who've never spoken in their lives. Like you."

A rolling, sick feeling settles in Will's stomach, but he tries to swallow around it. *'Good for her.'*

Something passes over his father's face. Regret, maybe. It's not a look Will's used to seeing. "I always wanted to take you to a doctor, Willy. I did. Your mom wanted to have somebody poke around in your head, but I told her 'No, Lottie, he's not crazy. He just needs somebody to teach him to talk, that's all'."

Something starts bubbling in him, at the use of his mother's name. Battery acid and stubborn sparks. It feels targeted, a small act of seeking out Will's softest parts. He sets his guitar aside, like he's worried that the venom will work its way into the frets.

"But it was always too expensive, you know? And it never felt like we'd be sticking around long enough for a doctor to make any progress with you, either way."

Will sighs, trying hard to soften his edges before he replies. This is risky territory, he's well aware of that. The delicate work of comforting the person at fault. He cooks up the best platitude he can without opening a vein, something along the lines of 'That's okay, Dad. I like myself the way I am'. It rings hollow in his head, though, because he's said as much at least a hundred times before. It never seems to make a difference.

Will's dad looks at him from the far end of the sofa. Before Will gets a chance to lift his hands, the older man smiles. "But now we're here," he says. "And we've got a little money to spare. for once, so—" he gestures at the air in front of himself. Will holds his breath. No, please, anything else.

"I told Doctor Du Maurier about you."

It's remarkably similar to being punched, stricken right in the center of his windpipe. For years, Will's been learning to anticipate his father's actions. Tracking his moods, watching his patterns, trying his damnedest to guess what he'll be doing and when. All in a desperate attempt to avoid being caught as horribly by surprise as he is right now.

"She's got some nasty rates, but she offered me a discount if we fix up her ex-husband's speed boat. You can start seeing her in August, Willy. If you work hard, then by the time you turn eighteen, you might already be talking like you've been doing it your whole life."

Unable to look his father in the face, Will stares at the television. Its screen is dark, holding a dim reflection of himself in its surface. The image is one of frozen shock, stricken and hollow at once. He flinches when a broad hand pats his arm, cringes when the man beside him chuckles.

"Well? Aren't you excited?"

Will blinks. His face draws into a frown, his thoughts quickly rushing back. The haze of his emotions begins to dissipate, burned away with fresh, searing clarity.

'...You're joking, right?' he asks. *'You can't possibly think that I would actually be happy about this. I don't want to go to speech therapy, Dad, I've never wanted that.'* And even as he signs it there's a voice in his head whispering that it doesn't matter. That this is what his father wants, and that's all he's ever given a shit about.

He's expecting an explosion. He's earned one, really. The most he gets a twitching around his dad's eye socket.

"I'm doing this for you," he says, and his tone is definitive. "You'll be glad I did it, too. You won't need to sign anymore, and you'll be grateful that I sent you. You'll finally be able to talk to people, make friends."

'I already had friends!'

Another tense silence blooms. It stings, makes him feel impotent, like his words aren't even worth responding to. At first, Will considers starving him out, but it only takes a minute or two for Will to burst.

'I'm not going,' he insists, but his father doesn't even blink. *'I'm almost seventeen, you can't just make me do whatever you say.'*

"Do you know what I really want out of this year, Willy?" He stands, making his way for the fridge. Carving distance between them, as if they aren't already miles and miles apart. " 'Cause I've been thinking about how I want things to go. And I've decided that I can't keep fighting with you."

He looks back at Will, a fresh can of beer in his hand. He shrugs, as if at a loss. Shakes his head. "I can't, I'm fucking tired. And I know you're tired of it, too."

Will balls his hands into fists. He's *tired? 'You can't just—'*

"So we're just not gonna fight anymore, okay? We're not wasting any more energy going back and forth. We're done."

'And I don't even get to have an opinion about it?' Will demands, and sure, fighting back won't do him any good but *fucking come on. 'What you say goes, and I don't get any say in it?'*

"You get a say in your attitude," he shoots back. "You get to decide whether you'll try and make the best of it, or if you want to stay miserable for the rest of your life."

Will scoffs, standing from the sofa and advancing on him as he signs *'I'm deciding to be fucking pissed!'*

His dad just gives him a condescending smile. "Well, that's a damn shame."

He can feel himself going red in the face. The heat of his indignation is boiling him, flesh bubbling from his body.

'I'm never going to understand what you want, am I?' he asks.

"What did I just say?"

Will just keeps signing, holding his father's attention while he has it. His hands start to shake with the force of his fury. If this argument had happened two months sooner, he imagines he would be fighting back tears right now. His eyes stay dry. *"When I was a kid, you acted like I was a failure whenever I needed you. You wanted me to be independent, right? I wasn't supposed to ask you for anything?'*

"We're not doing this, son."

The warning doesn't stop him, he leans across the counter, begging his father to *hear* him. *'And then I finally learn how to think for myself, and all you want to do is control me!'*

"I said stop flapping your *fucking* hands at me!"

He seizes Will's right hand, slams it hard into the counter. The outer bone of his wrist meets harshly with the surface, sending a dull pain up his ulna like it's been struck by a tuning fork. Will tries to pull away, but his father catches the injured joint in his grip and holds it there.

"If you want to say something to me, then open your mouth and fucking say it."

Will sets his jaw, stares him down, waits. Both of them do.

It takes a couple beats, but then Will's father is releasing him, staring bitterly at the space where his hand had been.

"Bitch about it all you want," he mutters, and the rage in his tone sends a stab of fear through Will in spite of himself. "But you're going to that doctor, and she's gonna fix you."

Will feels the word like teeth against a swollen taste bud. *Fix.* That's all he's ever been, in his father's eyes. Something broken that he lacks the tools to fix. It cools his anger, plunges him neck-deep into the ice so quickly that it makes him nauseous. Another blow that feels carefully targeted, though Will begs it to be incidental. He wants, terribly, to believe that his dad just... doesn't notice how it shatters him. Being so invisible is painful enough, but the alternative is that his father knows exactly what he's done. That he *wants* Will to feel this way.

"Go to your room, Will."

It's an order he's never heard, before. A punishment he's never had the luxury of suffering. As if from beyond his body, he nudges his feet in the direction of his bedroom door.

"And don't come out 'til morning."

Already, he can anticipate the hunger that will wake him in the dead of night. He sighs, reaches for the doorknob. For a fleeting moment, he entertains the thought of slamming it behind him. A final burst of anger, useless as it may be.

When the door shuts behind him, it’s with the most gentle click he can manage.

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream

Chapter Notes

> Hey, so I'm really proud of this chapter but before you read it I just want to say: This chapter is DARK. I know that the whole story is dark, but in my opinion this is the darkest the fic ever gets (or will ever get). So please don't read this right before work, right before bed, etc. Make sure you're in a good place before you dig in.
>
> Big TW for Suicidal Idealization and Suicide Attempt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised, that it feels nearly the same in an enclosed room as it does on a couch. Lying there, floating in his thoughts. Watching the honey rich sunlight pass down the wallpaper in stripes through slats in the cheap plastic blinds. They sink, dim. Will watches as night falls over his bedroom, the tiny chunk of Myrtle Beach that's been designated as his own prison cell.

In his darkest moments, Will often copes by meditating on his own insignificance. It's depressing, maybe, but he personally finds it comforting. He thinks about the people living in this building, the passengers in cars driving by below and flying in planes overhead. About the students he never spoke to in schools he'll never see again. All of them have their own lives to worry about, their own problems and priorities. They have no space in their minds to think about anything else. It makes Will feel like he can breathe, a little. Reminds him that the expectations that crush him on every side— the guilt, the pressure, the shame— they aren't actually as large as they seem. They only feel so big because Will's world is so, so small.

Will doesn't fall asleep. He doesn't stand up, either. Just lies in his bed, staring at the tiny gaps in his window. He listens.

His father eats dinner, eventually. Something small. A sandwich, maybe. He sits on the couch, flips through channels. Lands on some trashy crime procedural, watches it for what Will would guess to be an hour and some change. He gets up occasionally, probably to grab another drink or take a piss, sits back down. The sting of being so ignored is duller, like this. In other lives, Will's had to lie on couches. Curled up tight in a shivering little ball, repeatedly burned by the sight of his father in his periphery. The door between them does something for that burn, at least.

There was a time that Will would lie awake wondering about his father. Right though the night until sunrise, sometimes, his head racing with questions he'd never get the answers to. All 'why does he do this and how do I stop it', 'what have I done to him and how do I fix it'. What does he love, and how can it be me.

Those questions never did anything for him, though. So eventually he stopped wondering. Whatever his dad wants, Will's not it. So what can he do, aside from just try to hide himself from view? He's already so hidden, though. He's not sure how much smaller he can get without disappearing altogether.

Footsteps move from the couch to his father's bedroom, the door shuts. Will listens to him through the walls as he crashes into bed, and then the apartment is plunged into silence.

Will sighs, folds his arms across his chest. He hadn't expected his dad to knock on his door, not really. He hadn't been holding out for a 'good night'. He didn't *want* one.

The grip of his arms turns tighter. His right wrist throbs painfully where his father silenced him. He draws his knees to his chest. It feels like the walls are closing in on him, suddenly. Like the room wants to press him down into a flat little parcel, something that could just slip between the floorboards one day and never be found again. Misplaced.

Will's breaths come sharp, shallow. He shuts his eyes tight, bites his lip so hard he's lucky it doesn't split. The air in the apartment is too close, he feels like he's drowning in it.

An ambulance goes flying by down below, screaming bloody murder as it speeds down the street. The siren shocks Will back to himself a little, makes him crave a glimpse of the world beyond this room. He *needs* to get outside.

He opens his bedroom door as gingerly as possible, the words 'don't come out 'til morning' rattling around in his skull all the while. His father either doesn't hear him or doesn't care, though, because Will pads his way out of the apartment and into the hall without being interrupted. He creeps down to the staircase at the end of the hallway, the soles of his bare feet whispering over tacky, stained carpet. Every tiny noise makes him flinch, like this, his nerves constantly anticipating the moment that something leaps out and grabs him.

Will rubs anxiously at his arms as he ascends the stairs. They lead him higher and higher, floor by floor, slowly but never stopping. Their building only has nine floors, but when Will reaches the top, he looks down to the bottom of the stairwell and feels as though he's at the summit of some impossibly high tower. It's an unnatural, cavernous space, populated only by shades of pale grey and the distant droning of an unseen air conditioning unit. There's something wrong with it, he thinks. Something that can only be articulated by the odd plummeting sensation it inspires in his gut.

Will tears his eyes from the staircase abruptly, shaking himself as he grips the handle of a thick, industrial door. With a soft intake of air, he heaves it open and steps out onto the roof.

Their building is a few blocks away from the beach, but from so high up the ocean air has no issue reaching him. It whips at his face, shoving great clumps of hair into his eyes and tickling his nose with salt. Will takes in a deep lungful of it, luxuriating in how alive it feels over his senses. Invigorating, after the staleness of his room.

Even with an abundance of streetlamps to guide his path, the rooftop is shrouded in darkness. Will tiptoes his way to the roof's edge, carefully sidestepping piles of seagull shit and broken glass. There's a ledge, lining the building's perimeter. A barrier, separating the safety of the

roof from open air. Will leans against it, squishing the skin of one gaunt cheek into his palm, his elbows braced on the rough concrete surface.

There's another apartment building, just across the street. It's a little bit taller, a little bit nicer. The people Will sees going in and out look a little bit richer. Not fabulously so, but enough for it to be noticeable. The rooms all have their blinds closed, even the ones with light spilling out. Will stares, regardless. Imagines the people inside. Perhaps in this one here, he thinks, a man sips clear liquor from a glass with a wedge of lime inside. Perhaps in the one beside him, a mother helps her daughter with her homework. Perhaps a couple on the very top floor are in their bed, not sleeping. They're fucking, or reading to one another, or talking, late into the night. And they're terribly in love, so in love that none of their problems even seem to matter.

Will looks to the sky, searching for some sort of beauty in the stars overhead. Something inspiring, something transcendent. Distant rocks and balls of gas. He's tired. He's never been so tired.

Not for the first time, he wonders if this is just the way things are meant to be. No one's fault, not his father's or his own or anyone else's. Maybe certain people just have to be unhappy, to make space for others to find their happiness. Maybe someday Will can come back, as a baby or a pigeon or a sweetgum tree, and then he'll get his turn. Simple as that, just sit and wait.

Will grits his teeth. He's been sitting and waiting for nearly seventeen years, now. It's not any easier now than it was when he was little, either. He'd thought once that it might get better with time, that he'd get used to keeping his head down and counting down days. Instead he's lost sight of what he's even meant to be counting down to. Too many years staring at his shoes, focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Where is he *going?*

Just hold out 'til you're eighteen, that's what he's been repeating in his head for the bulk of his life. Now he's nearly there, staring down the barrel of his seventeenth birthday, and realizing that he has no idea what comes next.

It feels like nothing, that's the awful truth of it. The bitter, foul taste that he can never wash out. Like he'll grow up and nothing will even change. He'll still be here, still be broke and broken. All alone, with no one in the world but his father.

Again, he shakes his head, smacking his palm roughly against his temple in a desperate bid to dislodge his own thoughts. The impact sends jolts of pain up his arm and he hisses through his teeth, clutching at his wrist. He searches, pleading, for somewhere to hide, somewhere to run. He's pressed tight to the ledge, there's nowhere left to go.

Savage, his heart thundering like a cornered beast, he heaves himself onto the barrier. It's narrow, the concrete barely spanning the length of his bare feet. His balance falters as he tries to stand, his arms shooting out wide at his sides as the world sways around him.

His lungs heave as he finds his footing, sucking in gasps of air like it's a rare treat he's been spoiled with. That crushing feeling is back, but it's coming from within this time, like his rib cage has been swapped out for a bear trap. All at once Will realizes that the thing squeezing the life from him has never been the walls of their apartment, or the weight of his father's

hands on his shoulders. It's in his bones, somehow, deep in the marrow where he can't even claw at it. His mouth falls open. Something like a shriek sits frozen at the back of his throat, 'help me, someone, the call is coming from inside the house'. Nothing leaves him.

Will hides his face in his hands, childish and utterly exposed. I'm scared, the formless voice of his thoughts whispers. No one hears him. I'm scared, please help me, *I'm scared.*

The summer wind flutters at the loose fabric of his over sized T-shirt, cooling his shame-flushed skin. Naive in its innocence, his heart begs for more relief. For gentle breezes, open air, water in a river. Miles away, he hears a scream.

Will pulls his hands down to find himself teetering on the roof of a nine-story building, perched precariously on its ledge. He'd known that he was there, on some level, but the bright reality of it still catches him by surprise, strikes him like a blow. He looks to the street below— far below, so far that it makes his stomach churn— and sees a woman. She stands on the sidewalk, her child's hand clutched tight in her own. He can't make out the details of her face, both of them disguised with distance and dark, but he knows that the scream had come from her mouth.

He flinches backward, then, tripping over himself in his desperation to get back to more solid ground. The roof welcomes him back, albeit unforgivingly. Will crashes into a heap on his back, his chest rising and falling so rapidly that he's not sure the oxygen is even making it all the way to his lungs before it's being gasped out again. The ground doesn't even get a chance to stop swirling beneath him before he's scrambling his way to his feet.

He's half-blind as he runs for the door, sprinting like his mounting panic is a creature nipping at his heels. A shard of a broken bottle bites into one of his feet, making its presence known with every shaky step. Hot blood wets his skin, leaves deep red tracks on the rusty rooftop. Will doesn't slow. He wrenches the door open, darting down flights of stairs like a startled deer through the brush.

It's not until he reaches the landing for his own floor that he finally stalls. He slumps against the wall of the stairwell, still trembling and gasping for breath. He can't see straight, his head is pounding. It feels like standing up too fast on an empty stomach. His knees buckle, nearly spilling him onto the hard floor.

Slowly, stupidly, Will picks up his left foot. His numb fingers search for the fragment still lodged in his sole, his thicket of hair obstructing his view all the while. It feels like it takes hours, but eventually he manages to pull the glass free. Funny. He'd felt the pain of this intrusion like a blade stabbing at his foot as he ran, but it's dwarfed in his palm. Small. Will lets it fall to the ground, soundless as it drops from his now bloodstained hand.

The shock is turning heavy, now. Less of a jolt to his senses and more a thick blanket of snow, dragging him back to the earth. He staggers down the hallway like a drunk, his usually-nimble footfalls striking the earth with lumbering slaps. Even so, his father doesn't stir when Will returns to the apartment. Maybe he ought to feel relieved about that. Maybe he ought to be disappointed. Nothing manages to break through the ice, though. Nothing save for exhaustion and far-away horror.

He struggles to open the door to his bedroom, dead hands slipping again and again on the knob. The room looks even smaller than when he left it, somehow. Too small for a whole person to fit inside. More like a doghouse than a prison cell.

All Will wants in all the world right now is to fall into bed and sleep. To hide himself from his reality, find a place to nestle between his dreams. Something tells him that sleep won't be finding him tonight, though, no matter how diligently he searches for it.

He sighs, more weary than ever. He can't keep going like this. None of this was ever sustainable, not even for another year. He can't do this anymore, *something* has to give.

Will's hands curl into fists, release, curl again. He reaches for his bedside drawer.

He refuses to let himself think as he sits on the bed, notebook propped against his knees and pen gripped tightly in his aching hand. He doesn't listen to the voice in his head, the one telling him that this is dangerous. Will doesn't care if it's dangerous anymore, fucking *dying* is dangerous, too. He squeezes the pen like he's choking the life from it, trying to steady out the quivering of his hand as he writes the first desperate word.

'Hannibal—'

Chapter End Notes

woo! is everybody good? how we feeling? :)

I'll Send All My Lovin' to You

Chapter Notes

okay! we got through the scary part, time for a breather! it's extra long this time because i thought y'all deserved it after last chapter <3

CW for brief descriptions of suicide (dream sequence)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two knocks, strong knuckles tapping steadily against thin wood. Will blinks, the violent sun piercing through blinds in its quest to batter his weary eyes. He scrubs at them with a heavy hand, burrowing himself further under his blanket despite the already oppressive heat.

Will had not been sleeping. He hadn't been awake, either. Instead, the events of the night before had thrust his consciousness into some hellish in-between, a blur of dazed wakefulness and bizarre half-dreams. His mind conjured an eternity of gruesome alternatives to what had happened on the roof, and subjected Will to each one, presented in nauseating, vivid clarity.

Will plummeting to the ground, falling a hundred feet or more. The descent itself, which would have only taken seconds in reality, stretched outward in every direction until Will repeatedly forgot that he was even falling, only to be reminded again by a distant shriek coming from an unknown source. The air howled by, jabbed cruelly at his face and tore its fingers through his hair. For what seemed like hours, the ground refused to draw closer. Until it finally did.

His body crashed into the ground, the impact making him bounce like a macabre little toy. His still-twitching corpse folded itself into a mangled heap on the sidewalk, his mouth agape, his eyes staring unseeing at the street before him. Or maybe the landscape changed partway down, and he found himself careening into water. The surface tension shattered his bones, his screaming mouth filled instantly with saltwater. The water weighed him down, tugged him further under. He tried to kick his legs, to swim for the surface. They were broken, disobedient. Just more dead weight, dragging him to the black abyss below.

In one particularly horrifying dream, Will was caught shortly after jumping by the scruff of his neck. He looked up, terrified to find that his father was standing over him, holding the back of his shirt collar between two massive fingertips. He was the size of a skyscraper, at least, scowling down at Will as if disgusted by how utterly dwarfed he was. Will fought with all his might, kicking and screaming, demanding to be let go. He looked down at the street beneath them, and a crowd of strangers had gathered on the sidewalk. Hundreds of passersby, all staring up at him as he struggled. Will cried in the dream, great tears like rivers streaming down his face. He begged them, again and again, *'Stop looking at me!'*

The night felt like it went on and on, impossibly long, each vision passing by in a matter of minutes but feeling like entire lifetimes as his body lay pinned helplessly in place.

He's grateful, then, that the pair of knocks were able to shake him into lucidity. As tired as he is, the harsh light of day is a very welcome thing.

Two more knocks, and then the door is swinging open. "C'mon, Willy," his father says, cold but casual. "Time to get to work."

Will nods, wincing and cradling his aching temple in his palm a moment later. Of course, back to normal. They won't be discussing last night in any capacity— their fight, or the thing that caused it, or what came after. It's all just… gone. Dust. It's a new day, after all. What's passed is passed. Will takes a deep breath, tries to shake the heaviness from his limbs. Back to the docks. The very idea of it exhausts him.

"You okay?"

Bile tickles the back of his throat. He freezes. Takes mental stock of himself. Can his father tell, somehow, what he'd nearly done just a matter of hours ago? Can he see it? Will fidgets a little with his hands, considers his circumstances.

'...I think I'm sick,' he signs after a moment.

His dad furrows his brows. "Yeah?"

Will hums an affirmative, as pitifully as he can. It's not even a lie, really. He feels fucking terrible. Still, he expects the older man to call him on his bluff, accuse him of pretending.

He must look as bad as he feels, though, because his dad just frowns at him from the doorway. "You don't think it's anything serious, do you?"

It doesn't hurt that he hasn't really tried to fake sick since he was little. He's accustomed to hiding his own weaknesses from view, but now he pivots hard in the opposite direction. Will tries to make himself look as miserable as possible when he says *'I'm just so tired, and I feel kind of dizzy. My head hurts really bad.'* All true, though not for reasons that a doctor's visit could cure. *'I don't know if I can work today, Dad, I'm sorry.'*

That last part is as essential as it is pathetic. He sees it when his father gives in, sees that it's the 'I'm sorry' that does it. The older man sighs, scrubs at his jaw. "Alright," he says, begrudgingly. "I guess I can survive without you for a day, yeah."

The relief knocks him onto his back, his head reuniting blessedly with the pillowcase. *'Thank you,'* Will signs, and he's saying it more to the universe than to the presence in his doorway.

A stiff approximation of a smile on appears his dad's face. "Sure. You need me to pick anything up for you on my way home? Some ginger ale, or a can of soup or somethin'?"

There's a fine line, here. The invisible border between 'greedy' and 'ungrateful'. Will weighs his odds, flashes a tired, timid smile in return. *'That sounds really nice, thanks.'*

Another knock, restless, against his door frame. “Get some rest, Willy. Drink plenty of water, take an ibuprofen. Let me know if it gets worse.”

Will nods obediently, burrows himself into the bed. His eyes fall shut as if automatically. *‘Already on it,’* he signs, his motions lazy and half-performed. The evil sun still agitates the pounding just behind his eye socket, even through closed lids, and he rolls to face the wall with a petulant little grunt.

The bed swallows him up, for a little while. Will luxuriates in the comfort while he has it, nestled in a tiny shelter of fabric while minutes tick by. Half-dozing, he manages to conjure prettier images than before. Hannibal’s quiet, nurturing home wraps around his brain like a handmade quilt. All its soft beds and open windows, the subtle scent of spice from a recently prepared meal. Waking up in Hannibal’s bed, the night he’d gone to them for sanctuary. Feigning sleep while someone who loved him stroked nimble fingers through his hair. Listening to his heartbeat. The memories stab at his ribs like bony fingers, but Will seeks them out regardless. He’d prefer the tenderness to being numb, he reckons.

Beyond the cocoon he’s made, Will is aware of his father getting ready for work. Hears the jingle of him fetching his keys, the clomping of his work boots, the front door swinging open and then crashing closed.

Will doesn’t move. He counts. Sixty, one-twenty, one-eighty, two-forty. Three hundred.

When five minutes have passed, Will throws back the covers and sits up in bed. He yanks open his bedside drawer, snatches his notebook from within.

He’s almost sick with embarrassment as he reads over the first draft. The letter he’d written last night reads like the cries of a helpless little child, ruddy faced and clutching at the pant legs of a passing stranger. It’s disgusting, Will has to read it with one eye open. **‘Help me,’** he’d scribbled, and Will grimaces at how the letters stand so crooked in his despair. **‘I can’t do this anymore, Han. I’m going to die here. Help me.’**

He’d meant it, when the letter was being written. Squinting at the page by moonlight, still shuddering beneath his skin while his cut foot and sprained wrist throbbed in time with his pulse, he’d meant every single word. By daylight, though, it makes his stomach turn. Hannibal can’t see this. *Nobody* can ever see him like this.

Will shakes his head, rips the letter from his notebook. He tears it in half, the halves in half, and again. Once his cries for help have been reduced to a handful of particularly morbid confetti, he tosses the shreds into their garbage can. He covers the evidence with an empty bag of off-brand Doritos, smushes down the can’s contents, returns to his bed.

-

‘Hannibal—

I know what you’re thinking right now. Trust me, I do. You’re thinking ‘Christ, he’s an idiot’. And hell, maybe you’re right. But if the smart thing to do with myself would be to just try and forget about you, then I’m afraid you’re gonna have to settle for an idiot.

Things aren't so good here, to tell the truth. I think it's changing me, being so far from you. It's lonesome here.'

Will bites his lip, flexing his grip around his ink pen as he prepares to cough up his heart and set it on the page. A twinge jumps up his arm, and he frowns at his wrist. It's swollen, a little purple where it'd met the counter the night before. Not broken, though. He wouldn't be able to move it if it was broken.

A river of dread pours down his back at the thought, and Will shudders. He's never really thought about it, but now he finds himself terrified of the possibility. He wouldn't have a way to write, if his father ever flew far enough from the handle to break his right hand. Signing would be a pain, too.

It's something he's never had cause to be afraid of, before. Sure, his dad has been known to smack him around a little from time to time, but what happened last night was different. Him slamming Will into the wall, the night he'd fled, had been different. Who's to say it won't get worse?

Maybe he should learn to write with his left hand, just in case.

'I miss you. Bad. I miss being with you.

I miss—'

He takes a shaky breath, tries to ease the tension wound tight in his shoulders. His pulse has started to pound, his heart racing with his words.

'I miss the person that comes out of me when we're together. I like him a lot better than whoever I am right now.

Write back. Please. I've got too much time on my hands here, too many hours to get lost in my head about things. I need to hear from you. I need to know if you're alright.'

Something inside of him aches. It always does, these days, but this ache is a much more powerful thing. It's awful, it gnaws at him, makes him want to cry. Will chases it doggedly.

'I need to know that you're still mine, Han. Because I know that I wouldn't be hurting like this if I wasn't still yours.

I love you.
-Will'

-

It's only about a mile's walk to the nearest post office. It feels like it's in another zip code, though. Will's body riots against every last step, overtired and underfed. The night before has left him feeling as though he'd taken a beating, like he'd made that final unpleasant meeting with concrete after all. Or several meetings.

The temptation to sleep through the morning had been a persuasive thing, but Will ignored it. He's only got so many hours before his father comes home, and there's no guarantee that he won't return early. Best to get this out of the way as quickly as possible, then spend the rest of the day watching TV and sneaking pickle spears from the back of the fridge.

There's a small line, but it moves swiftly. The Summer's not so debilitating this close to the ocean, Will finds. The heat doesn't turn people sluggish like it does elsewhere. He looks around the building, handwritten love letter clutched in his white-knuckled grip like he's scared someone's gonna snatch it from him.

It's not until he's next in line that he remembers that he doesn't have a fucking cent to his name. As he steps up to the counter, he starts to sweat.

The postal worker before him is barely older than Will himself, maybe nineteen or twenty. He's got dark gelled hair, chipped black polish on his nails, a black plastic band with a logo Will doesn't recognize around his wrist. The tag on his shirt identifies him as 'Caleb- Clerk'.

" 'Sup?" Caleb says, and Will notices how his demeanor seems to completely loosen at the sight of him. Youth recognizing youth, the inherent relief of being presented with a peer in a building full of people twenty, thirty years older than you.

Will smiles, a bit shyly. If this was happening a year ago, he might've tried to blame his fresh nerves on being in the presence of a cooler, older teen. He's gained the self-awareness now to acknowledge that no, this boy is cute, and it's making him fumble. Not as cute as Hannibal, of course, and that observation brings him back to the task at hand.

He coughs awkwardly, plucks a pen from a cup on the counter, mimes writing. Caleb frowns at him, but ultimately produces a stack of pale yellow post-its. Will nods his gratitude.

'How much does it cost to buy a stamp and an envelope?' he writes, and spins the stack around to face the clerk. Caleb reads the message, peers up at Will.

"Just one?" he asks, and Will nods again. Caleb glances over his shoulder, just for a second, then smiles. "Don't worry about it, I've got you."

Will grins, quickly folding the letter as Caleb slaps a single envelope and postage stamp onto the counter top.

"Just fill out the addresses, and I'll add it to the pile."

Will nods for a third time, the tip of his tongue pressed behind his front teeth as he writes. It feels strangely illicit, labeling the envelope with Hannibal's name. Brave, in a way that it really shouldn't be.

He freezes before he can write the return address. It wouldn't be accurate to call this plan impulsive, necessarily, but he hadn't really thought this far yet. There's no universe where his father sees a letter addressed to Will and doesn't open it, though, that much he knows.

Caleb has busied himself with some manner of inane paperwork, running over fragments of text with a neon yellow highlighter. Will clears his throat, scrawls another question onto the post-it.

'Can I—' He falters, unsure how to word his question without coming across as suspicious. **'Would you be able to just keep any mail for me here, instead of delivering it?'**

Caleb lifts a brow. "You want us to hold your mail," he clarifies. Will nods, immediately relieved. Not only is this possible, it's common. Thank fucking God. Caleb moves away from the counter for a moment and returns with a form, completely unbothered by Will's request. "Sure, man. No worries."

Will jots a quick **'thanks'** onto the pad, eagerly sets to filling out the paperwork. For the first time since leaving home, Will realizes that he's actually looking forward to something.

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The post office is fucking closed on Sundays.

It's something that Will has always been aware of, in the back of his mind. Mail doesn't run on Sundays, everybody knows that. And he's never really spared it a second thought, but now it's the bane of his fucking existence. Because *how,* exactly, is he meant to subtly get away from his father, on a day that the two of them are working, *during* the hours that the post office is open? And what if he manages it and there's no mail for him, and he has to check again?

It takes two long weeks for Will to spot his window. Fourteen days of patience when he's never felt less patient in his life, of charting his father's habits and routines even more meticulously than he already did. Fourteen days fucking praying that there would be something waiting for him, when he finally made it to his destination.

In the end, having Sundays off still ends up being his saving grace. He's not the only one who enjoys his down time, after all.

Will's father drinks more heavily on the weekends, which means he's usually hungover on Monday mornings. Which means he sleeps later, more deeply. It's not a reliable opening—Will would never go for it if he wasn't completely desperate. But if Will can rouse himself early Monday morning, there's a chance that he can slip out and back again before his dad wakes.

He holds his breath until he reaches the stairwell, tiptoeing like his father might be able to hear him down the hall. He's got a lie cooked up for if he gets caught, something about spying a stray dog from his bedroom window, but it's something he'd only be able to pull off once.

The heavy door shuts behind him, leaving Will alone with the supernatural pull of the spiraling stairwell once more. He ignores it, this time. No time for distractions, not today.

He flies down the stairs as quickly as he can without falling, acutely aware that he's working against the clock. As he sprints down the sidewalk, he considers his father. Less of a clock, maybe, and more of a ticking time bomb that could go off at any moment. The faster he goes, the safer he'll be.

Will makes it to the post office, sweat-damp and panting, in six minutes flat. He's pleased about that, until he tries the front door.

Locked.

Will tugs at the door again, heart sinking into the pit of his stomach. No, no, why is it locked?! Another pointless pull, and Will glances at a large window just beside him.

He peers through the front window, his panic snuffing out as quickly as it rose when he spies a familiar figure moving inside. Caleb. Will squints at a clock on the wall, tries to make out the time. The minute hand hasn't quite made it to the twelve o'clock position, yet. It's before nine. He's just a minute or two early, that's all.

Still, every second counts right now. Two knocks, quick and firm against the window. Caleb looks up from where he's sweeping the floor, saunters up to the glass. Will gestures in the direction of the front door, trying to make it clear through the window just how badly he needs to be let in.

Caleb just flashes a lopsided smirk, condescendingly points to his wrist even though he isn't wearing a watch, shrugs. Will rolls his eyes with an irritated huff, drumming anxiously on his thighs as the clerk steps out of view.

To his surprise, the door swings open a moment later. "You're early," Caleb notes, holding the door open as Will bustles through. "What's up? You look freaked out."

Will grabs a pen, leans over the counter to swipe a sheet of paper. Caleb doesn't seem to care. **'You're holding my mail. Do I have anything?'**

Caleb just shrugs again, rounding the counter with lazy strides. Will grits his teeth, mentally curses the boy for not moving faster. "Maybe," he grunts. "What's your name again?"

Will tries to remain patient as he writes down his name for the clerk, but the clock on the wall keeps ticking away, reminding him with every passing moment of the potential danger he's in. Caleb disappears to the back of the post office.

"Graham… Graham…" Caleb mutters, thumbing through some unseen receptacle in the back. It can't take more than a minute. Will is tapping his foot all the while. "Oh, yeah. Something came in like, a week ago."

A week ago? Will's heart skips. Hannibal must've sent his reply the same day he'd received Will's letter. For what must be the thousandth time since he sent it, Will envisions his letter arriving. Robertus walking into the foyer, flipping idly through their daily mail. Seeing Will's name on an envelope and calling Hannibal downstairs. He pictures Hannibal's face, imagines it breaking into that sharp little grin Will likes as he stares down at the letter.

Caleb deposits an envelope into Will's hands with a complete lack of ceremony, and a lump suddenly forms in Will's throat. It's his handwriting, **'W-i-l-l G-r-a-h-a-m'** in Hannibal's neat, swooping script. Will, lovesick fool that he is, runs his now-trembling fingertips over the address like it's scripture. His face breaks into a wide, goofy smile.

The clock chimes, alerting both boys of the turning hour. Will blinks, tears his gaze away from the treasure in his hands.

'Thanks,' Will signs, salutes, and then he's gone.

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He runs all the way back to their apartment building. The journey back is a bit more harrowing, the air quickly turning hotter around him. Even so, he doesn't stop until he's back in the stairwell.

It would be smarter, probably, to wait until he's back upstairs, safely hiding in his bedroom where he can steal glances at the letter without looking overly suspicious. He can't bear to wait. After all, his paranoid mind whispers— what if Will's father is already awake? What if he's waiting for Will to come walking through the door, to demand to know where the hell he's been? He could pluck the letter from Will's hands before he's even gotten the chance to open it.

Tearing into the envelope like he's opening a Christmas present, Will unfolds the letter. There's two items inside.

The first page is a drawing. Some strange, giddy sound bubbles out of Will when he sees it. Not quite a laugh, but certainly joyful. It's another portrait of Will, pale against a glaringly dark background. His hair falls in his face, pools over his shoulder, flirts with his collarbones. There's just enough of Will's body in frame to make it clear that he's shirtless. He's got a nervous grin on his face, front teeth peeking from beneath a plush, swollen lip. His cheeks are dusted with a youthful flush, his gaze a little coy. It's a snapshot from Hannibal's memory of the night Will left, he realizes. The night they made love.

Looking at the drawing sends heat bursting over his face, turns him bashful even when the artist is nearly a thousand miles away. He resists the urge to caress the image, to drag his fingers over where Hannibal had been. It replaces Will within his skin, looking at the portrait. Like Hannibal has taken the abstract, formless mass he's become, and packed him comfortably away in his own body. The feeling is not dissimilar to being tucked into bed.

Shaking, he unfolds the second sheet. A letter. Will holds his breath, reads the words a dozen times over, hands clutching at the thick stationery like it's a lifeline. It is.

'My Dearest Will,

Words fail to capture how I felt when I received your letter. I'm elated. I feel like I've been floating, everywhere I go, since the moment it arrived.

I've missed you terribly since you left. And I share your sentiment— I don't feel much like myself in your absence, either. I long for you. Constantly. And while I could never be happy to hear that you're suffering, it does ease my pain somewhat to know that this longing is something we share.

I'm relieved to hear from you. We've been so worried for you, Uncle and I. I haven't been able to sleep, some nights. All I can seem to do is stare out my bedroom window, dreaming that a stolen pickup truck might come sneaking down my street.

I was afraid that I would never speak with you again, Will. I've been in mourning, without you. Aching for your return, trying desperately to come to terms with the loss of you. For days, I could not eat. I refused to leave my bed. I've rotted for you, my love.

I describe these things not to worry you— I'm alright, I promise— but to show you just how dearly you are loved. There will always be a space, carved into the very muscle of my heart, that holds your shape. Yes, darling, I am yours. It soothes my soul to see you say that you are mine, in turn. I love you.

I'll be eagerly awaiting your next letter, Will. I hope that I won't have to wait long. And if it makes you a fool to write it, then I ask you— For my sake, be a fool.

With all my love,
-Your devoted Hannibal'

Chapter End Notes

eeee im so excited and proud about this chapter i hope yall like it eheheh

Nowhere to Hide

Chapter Notes

> FINALLY, after weeks of writers block, i think ive managed to push through and get something together. I hope y'all like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘With all my love, your devoted Hannibal.’

Will’s read those words so many times this month that he imagines the pathologist who eventually conducts his autopsy will find them engraved into the matter of his brain. He pours over them at night, hunched over Hannibal’s letters and meditating on them by moonlight like some long-dead monk. Those seven words have become the axis upon which Will’s reality hangs, the precarious ledge that separates his feet from open air. It’s a dangerous place to rest, he can admit that. But it’s more than he’s had all Summer, so he clutches at the sentiment until his fingers start to ache.

A gust of air rushes by, bullying sparse patches of marram grass as it goes. The wind is more obnoxious than usual, lately, coughing great bursts of ocean air in every direction. It sneaks beneath Will’s T-Shirt, flutters at its fabric as if pestering him for his attention.

Will sighs. The dock is stiff against his spine, searing hot after soaking up the sun all morning. It’s slow, today. Slow enough that Will has nothing left to do. His eyes are shut tight against the glaring sun, he’s more aware than usual of the rhythm of his breathing. How his rib cage swells with each inhalation, the way his stomach sinks low when the air goes sighing out. It’s meditative, in a way. Peaceful. The air smells like salt, and engine grease, and cheap sunscreen. Will tries to catalog these things, to package them in the prettiest words he can.

He only gets to exchange so many words with Hannibal in each letter, after all. Every stilted conversation he’s ever scrawled on notebook pages feels like endurance training, in hindsight. Preparing himself for the glacial torment of loving someone so infuriatingly far away. Every word has to count, now. Everything Will says has to be *worth* saying.

The dock creaks with shifting weight. Will’s dad has been reorganizing his tools for the past twenty minutes, now, muttering to himself about how much he’d like to get himself a new socket set. Will feels the thudding of his father’s boots against his back as the man approaches, sees the world grow dim even behind closed eyes.

Will squints into the light. The sky is almost painfully blue overhead. It’s full of clouds— big wispy, streaky ones, like strokes from a nearly dry paintbrush. The shape of his father blocks out the sun from this angle, his features masked in shadow. Unease starts brewing in him, the ambiguity of his circumstances awakening an eons-old, animal instinct to scurry away.

The figure looming over him just laughs, rough and easy. “Havin’ fun?” he asks, and because Will can tell by his tone that he’s not in trouble, he nods.

His father chuckles again, and Will does his best to ignore how the contents of his skull seem to sway when he sits up. The wind plucks at strands of his hair, shoves them peevishly into his face. Will huffs, pushes it back for the hundredth time that day.

“You ever gonna let me cut that hair, boy?” the old man asks. He’s still joking. Will thinks he’s still joking.

‘I like it how it is,’ he insists, less passionately than he has in the past.

“You’re lying.”

Will tenses. Accusations like that always end in disaster, even about little things.

“You’re fightin’ with it every second of the day, Willy. It weighs you down, makes you sweat. Just let me get my clippers, we’ll shave it all off.”

‘I look stupid with it shaved, Dad. My ears are too big. They stick out, I look like Gomer Pyle.’

That makes his dad snort, and he shakes his head. “Since when are you so worried about your looks, anyway? You never used to care about that kind of thing.”

Will just shrugs, bowing his head to hide his expression behind a wall of hair. He stares down at his reflection in the water, sees thin lips and a curved nose and tired, sullen eyes. It’s become something of a ritual for him, lately. He sets aside several minutes a day to the study of his own reflection— in mirrors, water, his bedroom window. He hadn’t realized, until Hannibal’s portrait arrived, just how little he’d come to recognize himself. Without really meaning to, he’d become an inky, skittish creature. Quivering in the sand, hunched and poised to run, crying *‘Don’t look at me’*. It’s dangerous, he can feel it.

So he looks, frowning hard against the sun’s glare. It’s me, he thinks to himself, looking into his own waterlogged image. I know, I know it’s me. The synapses refuse to fire. He leans over the water, looking closer.

“You’re beautiful.”

Will’s neck twisted, staring at Hannibal’s bedroom window like turning his head away would be enough to hide himself. His face flooded with warmth in seconds, cheeks going rosy without his permission. Hannibal just laughed, soft and warm, and Will’s heart skipped a beat.

“Look at me.”

He obeyed. Of course he did, he’d walk through fire for Hannibal if he asked. The heat of his boyfriend’s gaze was nothing, in comparison.

Hannibal was lying beneath him, Will straddling his hips. They'd been making out, when Will initially crawled into the other boy's lap. Now they were just… enjoying. Ambling, without any real goal in mind.

'I mean it,' Hannibal signed, and Will felt fit to burst with adoration. He reached out, carded fingers into Will's hair. They whispered through the locks, spilling through the spaces between Hannibal's fingers like fluid. He caught one strand around his index finger before it could slip away, curled it round and round. Playing. "I could look at you forever."

Will faltered, as he often did under the other boy's attention. He tugged at the hem of his T-shirt, averted his gaze. 'Thanks,' he replied dumbly, then bit his tongue. 'I mean, you're not so bad yourself, you know.'

Another laugh, and Will huffed his exasperation.

'Shut up, I'm serious.'

'I know you are,' Hannibal replied, his smile turning soft. 'You're sweet, that's all. I'm not laughing at you.'

Will sighed, observing his boyfriend with a slight frown. 'Hey. I know I'm not as good with words as you are, but… I do like looking at you, too. A lot.'

Hannibal's smile bloomed, at that, dazzling Will like fireworks. He threaded his fingers into Will's hair once more, tugging Will by the back of his head until he was near enough to kiss.

He shrugs, again, tearing his eyes away from the water. *'I don't know what changed,'* he lies, looking up at his father. *'I just care, now, I guess.'*

-

Funny thing about Ellison. The urban legend goes that he wrote the first draft of *'I Have no Mouth, and I Must Scream'* in a single sitting. He woke up in the middle of the night, in a cold sweat, and couldn't make himself rest again until every last word had been purged from his mind. Less like divine inspiration and more like some sort of literary exorcism, his ideas projecting from him like bile onto the page.

Will finds himself wondering if his own experience might be comparable.

He's thrown himself headfirst into his letters. The first one was barely a page long. The second is three sheets, front and back, crammed into a little envelope along with a piece of Will's heart. It's the only thing holding him together, the writing. His thoughts are under heavier guard than they've ever been before, Will herding them like a sheepdog whenever they start to stray. His head is stupid, that's what Will's learned. Too prone to wandering its way right into a rope, a razor blade, the edge of a rooftop.

It's best to keep them occupied. Single-mindedly focused on his next letter. He crafts them obsessively, writing and rewriting and rewriting them every night until they're ready to be sent on Monday morning. He's sworn off writing poetry, for the moment— he can't seem to

access that part of himself, here— but he waxes on and on, in his head and on the page, trying to take the raw liquid of his soul and distill it down into something fit to drink.

It may be less authentic, this way. Over-refined. Maybe that's for the best. He tells Hannibal everything worth saying, in his letters— where he's going, what he's doing, how horribly Will misses him. But for every inane tidbit he includes, there are countless things that Will prays Hannibal will never have to know.

Will wonders, on occasion, if the other boy might be omitting things as well.

Hannibal is always generous in his correspondence. His letters are not as long as Will's, but he always supplements them. Drawings, book recommendations, his opinions on this film or that. Poems, either sections or in their entirety, transcribed from well-loved volumes by Hannibal's own careful hand. Will stows it all away, stored in the center of a clumsily hollowed-out copy of *Jekyll and Hyde* that he'd accidentally stolen from a library when he was thirteen. The process of gutting the volume made him wince, but he had faith that Stevenson would understand.

He entertains. Distracts. Says things like **'I went to our usual spot and did some sketches for you. I thought you may be longing for our river,'** in a desperate bid to lift Will's spirits.

'Margot came to see me, she's well. She misses you. She asked me to come over, but I declined. I'm afraid I'm not particularly good company, at the moment.'

It's nice. Having something to occupy him, something to remind him that an entire world exists beyond Will's immediate surroundings. He's in urgent need of those sorts of reminders, lately.

A tinny little bell rings when Will enters the music shop. The windows are blacked out by countless posters, leaving the interior shockingly dim after being in the glaring afternoon light. The air smells strongly of incense, and Will wrinkles his nose.

He tries not to get distracted by the instruments lining the walls— countless shining bodies of spruce, rosewood, mahogany. They call out to him like sirens, but he forces himself to look ahead.

Will's old man might be a selfish son of a bitch, but he's willing to reach into his wallet for things that align with his interests. And for a variety of reasons, some less savory than others, Will's ability to play music is something he's got a *very* vested interest in. So when one of the strings on Will's guitar snapped halfway through *Walkin' After Midnight,* his dad sent him out for a fresh pack.

He makes a beeline for the row of tiny packages near the register, snags one, allows himself to be briefly distracted by a display of shoulder straps with cool patterns. Half of him is paying attention to his surroundings, the other half trapped in his own head. It's his preferred mode of existing, for the moment. With one foot in the door.

So he doesn't really notice the woman working at the register until he's already tossed the strings onto the counter.

“This gonna be it for you?”

He glances up at her as he nods, then freezes in place.

The cashier is older, maybe in her late thirties, with short blonde hair that’s slicked back in a way that comes off as decidedly masculine. Will’s never seen a woman that looked like her, at least not in person. Maybe in a magazine article, or on the news. Certainly not in the real world. But the thing that makes Will’s mouth dry out is her jacket. It’s make from black denim, distressed in places. Covered in safety pins, and buttons, and patches that look handmade.

And there, stitched proudly near the collar, is a little pink triangle.

The reaction Will’s body has to seeing the patch is absurd, really. A rush of something frightened, nervous, delighted. Like the second after seeing a cheap scare in a horror movie. You can’t just... *do* that, can you? In broad daylight, where anyone could see it? It’s right there, though, in front of Will’s face. This woman must be crazy. She’s stitched a fucking target onto her body, *on purpose.* Who the hell does something like that?

‘What do you wanna be when you grow up?’

Hannibal chuckled at the question, his back pressed to the trunk of their sweetgum tree. Will was lying with his head in the other boy’s lap. Their legs stretched out in the grass, perpendicular lines that were always destined to meet. ‘When I grow up?’ he repeated, and Will nodded.

He sighed, staring at their river for a long moment in contemplation. ‘Content, I suppose,’ he signed, and Will huffed in fond annoyance.

‘I meant, like. What do you want to do?’

Hannibal shrugged with one shoulder. ‘My uncle is a doctor. He seems to think I’d have a hand for it.’

Will nodded to himself, a tiny smile tugging at his face. ‘You’d be a good doctor,’ he decided, and nuzzled his face into the soft flesh of Hannibal’s stomach.

Hannibal laughed, Will felt the movement of his body against his cheek. ‘And what about you? Will you take up the family trade?’

A bad taste crept into Will’s mouth at the idea, and he shook his head forcefully. ‘I don’t know want I’m gonna do,’ he confessed. ‘Not that. I don’t really like thinking about the future much, to be honest.’

‘Why not?’

He frowned, hard. He regretted bringing it up, now. ‘It’s hard for me to picture a future that has me in it, I guess,’ he signed, and winced up at Hannibal. ‘Is that depressing?’

‘A little,’ Hannibal replied with a sad smile. He reached out, caressed the side of Will’s face. ‘You’ll be there, though. It won’t be like this forever. Things will change.’

Will sighed. There was something so… effortless, about Hannibal’s brand of hope. It soaked in easily, slipped through the cracks of Will’s cynicism. The world just seemed better, when they were together.

Hannibal nudged at his chin with the tips of two fingers, playfully urging him to cheer up. ‘What do you want to be when you grow up, darling?’

He thought it over for a long while, listening to the river flow by and leaves rustling in an errant breeze. Eventually, he lifted his hands. Curled them into fists, placed his thumbs over his middle knuckles. He crossed his wrists, pushed them away from each other, twisted his hands outward.

‘Free.’

“Kid? You gonna pay for these?” she asks, half-joking, and lifts a brow. Will pales, quickly fishing in his pocket for the money his father gave him. He places it in the woman’s waiting hand, swallows. Anxiously, he points to his own collarbone, indicating the location of her patch.

She blinks, frowning slightly. Then she peers down at her own jacket, and chuckles. Her demeanor changes in a flash, softening by the second. She tugs at the jacket, points to the triangle with a grin. “You like it?”

Will licks his lips. He looks over his shoulder, glances around the tiny store. It’s empty, just the two of them. So he flashes a shaky smile, and nods.

Another laugh. Not scornful. She finds him endearing, he thinks. Of course she does. She’s brave enough to wear the emblem to work, and Will is scared to even *acknowledge* it. He tries to choke back his embarrassment, to appear more comfortable. He’s failing.

She narrows her eyes a little, assessing him. Her hand braces itself on the counter as she leans closer.

“You family?” she asks.

Another uncomfortable flood of emotion. Is he *family?* He’s never been asked that before, but Will’s smart enough to guess at her meaning. His stomach twists, he feels sick. It’s only the two of them, he thinks. Would it really be so awful to be honest? To say *‘Yes, I’m family’?* Or even *‘I don’t really know if that’s what it is to me, yet. I think I’d like it to be.’*

Paranoia stomps its boot down on his neck, though, and he sighs. Will shakes his head, almost apologetically. The look on the woman’s face tells him that she doesn’t believe him. That she knows he lied. He doesn’t really understand why the guilt of this lie in particular makes him feel so terrible inside, but it does. Shame worms its way into his bone marrow, plucks at every fragile nerve. He takes the change from her as soon as its offered, snatches

the pack of strings, and practically runs from the store, hoping beyond hope that he never has to return.

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There's a couple, sitting on the bench across the street.

Will snuck out again tonight, justifying it to himself with the paper-thin excuse that he wanted to tell Hannibal about the local nightlife in his next letter. If he's honest with himself, he's just been desperate to get out. He's suffocating, here, grafted to his father's side like some atrophied conjoined twin. Old Bill is the host, the sole owner of their movements, their agency. Will's become nothing but a parasite, his growth limited to the boarders of his father's body. It makes him feel so deliciously human, slipping out into the night like this. He's doing it too often, he knows it. He can't make himself stop.

The young man is nervous in their surroundings, that much is obvious. His body language is drawn tight, his attention flitting all over the boardwalk. The woman beside him, by contrast, looks perfectly at ease. There's a cigarette dangling from her fingers, a loose grin on her face. They're talking, but Will is too far away to guess at the topic of conversation.

He jots down his observations in his journal. He takes notes on everything, now— the people passing by, the neon signs, the moon overhead. The best parts will be rewritten and passed along to Hannibal, the rest left to rot.

His right arm seizes up with a sharp, aching cramp, and Will hisses through his teeth as he rushes to massage the tender area. It still hasn't healed from his last fight with his old man, or it healed improperly. It doesn't help that Will writes almost constantly, now. The last 'letter'— more like a series of memoirs at this point, the last batch he sent was so many pages that Caleb down at the post office had to send them in one of those big manila envelopes that smell like sawdust— had been the product of dozens of hours' work. He can't make himself slow down, though. The purge is ongoing, his only choices now are to let it out or choke on it.

A group of college-aged kids stumble by, loudly talking about nothing. They reek of beer, it makes Will's stomach turn. He holds his breath until they've gone tottering down the street.

He looks at the bench opposite him, again. The couple's making out, the once-shy man no longer shy as he cups the woman's jaw. Will blushes, looks away. A powerful sting stabs at his heart like a needle, making it pop and start deflating. He doesn't write that down.

Will trudges back to the apartment with his head held down. Their letters are nice— wonderful, even— but there are gaps that simply can't be bridged with writing.

'I wish I could be with you,' Hannibal had said, and Will clutched the page fast to his chest as if to staunch a bleeding wound. **'I want to hold you in my arms, to hide my face against your throat and breathe you in. Feel your lips on mine.'**

His longing is a soft, fleshy thing. Tender, like a sunburn. It hurts to prod at, cries to be soothed and shielded from view. But the burn just keeps spreading, spreading. The deep red

want grows larger every day, he's running out of ways to hide.

He sighs heavily, trying hard to gather himself together. It's okay, the voice of Hannibal in his mind tells him as he grips the knob to the apartment. Just take things one day at a time, Will. Try to trust that everything, *everything,* is going to be—

"Where you been?"

The scent of alcohol is nearly unbearable. It makes Will gag as he steps into the room. His dad must've spilled some, neglected to clean it up and let it fester instead. There's bottles on the coffee table, a big square one lying at the old man's feet. He stares at Will from the couch, sprawled out in the dark. Even for him, this is excessive.

"I asked you a question, boy," he slurs. He doesn't shout. Doesn't stand. Will's not confident that he'll even be able to parse his answer, but he replies anyway.

'...I went out,' he signs, pulse hammering in his throat. *'People watching, down on the boardwalk.'*

He stares Will down, saying nothing. The TV flickers. It's on mute, but the light still fills the space with a sickly glow. Will glances to it. A commercial for Nike sneakers.

"Gimme that."

Will goes cold. His hands curl tight around the notebook, gripping it like he'll die if he lets it go. It takes every ounce of strength he's got to approach. He has to beg his limbs to move closer, force each of his fingers to release the journal. His father takes it, glazed eyes roaming over Will's writing as he skims through its pages.

'It's just notes. Stuff I think is interesting. I'm thinking about maybe writing a book, so…' he stops. His father isn't looking, anyway. Not interested in what Will has to say.

He tosses the journal roughly aside, takes a swig from the bottle nearest to him. "You ever ran off at night before?" he asks.

Will shakes his head. His father nods to himself, evaluating. Will winces when his upper lip curls.

"You think I'm fucking stupid or something?"

Something deep inside of him sinks. He shakes his head again, frantic. He signs it, too, for good measure. *'No, sir.'*

His old man drains the bottle, dismisses Will's answer with a wave of his hand. "Think you're so god damn smart," his father mutters, a drunken sort of fury overtaking him. "You're hiding something from me, Willy. You're always hiding something!"

Will tries to stand his ground, to look unfazed. His chest rises and falls rapidly all the same, fear clawing at him like it wants to climb his back.

“You’re not slick, kid. I’m gonna find it.”

The old man sits back. He almost looks comfortable. He sighs, scrubs at his face, gestures in the direction of Will’s bedroom.

“Go on, I don’t wanna fuckin’ look at you.”

He spares half a second to stare forlornly at the journal still lying at his father’s side. Trying to take it back will only make the item look more suspect, the best course of action would be to leave it for the night, and grab it in the morning before his father wakes up. The thought makes his fingers twitch, but he makes himself walk away, closing the bedroom door behind him as he goes.

He collapses into his bed, catching his breath and begging his head to stop throbbing. Fuck.

Maybe his dad won’t remember this encounter, come morning. Maybe it will go the way of so many fight between them, painful but ultimately ignored by the both of them. That doesn’t make it any easier for his racing thoughts to settle, though. He wants nothing more in all the world right now than to reach beneath his mattress and hold Hannibal’s pendant to his heart. To pour over his letters until the sun rises, allow himself to get utterly lost in the other boy’s words.

“You look tired.”

Will shrugged, staring out Hannibal’s windshield. ‘Yeah, well. I didn’t really get that much sleep last night.’

“I’m not going to ask,” Hannibal said, in the tone that meant he was already asking.

He sighed sharply. ‘Yes, Han, it was about my dad. We got into a fight. It’s fine, I don’t want to talk about it.’

Hannibal observed him for a long moment, his car still parked on the same street where he usually picked Will up. “We don’t have to spend the day together, if you aren’t feeling up to socializing,” he offered softly.

‘No,’ Will insisted immediately, staring back at his boyfriend with pleading eyes. ‘No, please, I need this today. It doesn’t feel like socializing, not with you. It feels… good. I wanna be with you.’

The other boy softened. Will was saying exactly the right things, and he knew it. “If you’re sure,” he muttered, flexing his hands on the wheel a little. “Then, I have a suggestion.”

‘Shoot.’

Hannibal smiled. “I think we should go to my house.”

Will balked, fumbling for a moment before signing ‘Are you sure Robertus is gonna be okay with that? Us, there together? When he’s not home?’

He waved it off. "With any other boy, he might've had reservations. Uncle makes many exceptions for you, though. You're always welcome."

'Yeah, Han, and I'd really like it to stay that way.'

Hannibal just laughed. Like Will was being silly. "You're exhausted, darling. Wouldn't you like to come home with me and take a nice long nap?"

A rush of heat went to his ears. 'What, like, in your bed?'

"If you'd like. You slept well in it last time, didn't you?"

Will lifted his hands to decline, but he didn't have the strength. He was unbelievably tired, emotionally raw from the night before and craving a taste of the warmth and comfort Hannibal offered. He wanted so badly to lie there, in the soft bed of someone who loved him, and just forget for a while.

'You sure you won't be disappointed, if I come over and just sleep?'

Hannibal shook his head, smiling gently. "I would be happy, actually. Seeing you at peace."

Will burrows himself into the blankets, tries to make himself comfortable. He's too keyed up to sleep, too scared to move. He tries to recall as much of Hannibal's letters as he can, staring hard at the shadows of his room.

His breathing starts to slow, bit by bit. All the while, Hannibal's voice murmurs away in his head. Snippets playing on loop, quotes from cherished sheets of paper.

'I miss you, darling. I wish you were here.'

'I hope you're eating well. Please try to stay hydrated, it's so hot this Summer.'

'You're so very loved, don't ever forget that.'

'I know you don't want to talk about it. I'm not asking you to. But please don't listen to your Father.' 'I worry about you, Will. Be strong.' Write back soon. Write back soon. Please, promise me that you'll write back soon.

With all my love, your devoted Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

believe it or not, i really toned down this chapter to make it less sad. dont say your boy sour never did anything for ya

coming soon(ish): Will has a special day <3

Favorite Spirit

Chapter Notes

I hope you guys like this one! It took a little work for me to be happy with it, but i THINK im satisfied now? lol

hopefully ill get to write ch39 sooner rather than later because im. REALLY EXCITED for that one heheheh

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a single, frantic moment, Will is sure he's drowning. Caught in that rift between wakefulness and dreaming, the corners of his room are amorphous, ill-defined. The air he gulps back is thick, the fabric of his shirt sticks to his spine. He'd dreamed of hands. Long, alien hands, with spindly fingers like spiders' legs. They rose from the water, prodded and pinched and plucked at every inch of him. Will tried to swim away, but the hands followed him. He kicked, and fingers wrapped tight around his ankles. They pulled his hair, yanked at his clothes. The more that Will fought, the further they dragged him down, until the light above slipped away and there was nothing but Will, and the dark, and countless fingers touching him.

Will takes a deep breath, pushes his hair back from his face. It's damp, like the rest of him. There's a film of dried sweat on his face, and he scrubs at it with the back of his hand, grimacing at how the tacky perspiration clings to the sparse hairs growing on his upper lip. It doesn't leave him any cleaner. Maybe he'll have time to take a shower before work, if he hurries.

He hauls himself from the bed, swaying a little on his feet when he stands. His heart still pounds with latent terror, and Will places a hand over his chest as he pads out into the apartment.

"Mornin'."

Will brings two fingers to his temple, sends them away with a flick of his wrist.

"You don't look so good," his father notes. Will shrugs, keeping his head down as he walks quickly toward the bathroom.

'Bad dream.'

His dad nods. "Well, take your time," he says, and Will frowns to himself. "And be thinkin' about what you want to do today."

Will pauses. He leans halfway out the bathroom door, brows drawn together. *'Are we not working today?'* he signs, and his father snorts.

"Course not, Willy. I always close up shop on your birthday."

He can't do more than stare dumbly for a few seconds, gears moaning in agony as Will forces them into begrudging motion. It's so hard to keep track of time, here. Days, weeks just seem to take whatever shape suits them for the moment, blurring into each other in this headache-inducing haze. It doesn't feel linear. He's stopped feeling confident that one day will follow the next in the way that it should. Instead it's just the *Summer*— this strange, cosmic monolith that looms over Will's head and extends in every direction— and within, nestled awkwardly at its center: today. July 2nd.

'It's my birthday,' he repeats. Not a question, more of an affirmation. A placing of himself within reality.

His dad just laughs. "Don't tell me you forgot."

Will tries to force a laugh, too. *'Guess it's just early.'*

"Well, go ahead and get ready, then we can go to the beach or somethin'—"

'I wanna go to the movies,' Will signs quickly, cautious excitement already brewing in his stomach.

His father huffs, not quite a laugh. "You say that every year," he notes derisively.

Will doesn't waver. *'I know I do.'*

"There's nothing good playing, anyway."

'We could rent something.'

The contempt on his face is only present for a flicker, there and gone again, but Will sees it. "Wouldn't you rather, hell, I don't know— go to the boardwalk? Or we could go fishing. It's been a long time since you and me went fishing together."

He shrugs, dismissive. *'We've got all day. I guess we could go look at some pawn shops or something before we go to the video store.'* The underlying *I'm never going fishing with you again* goes unsaid.

His dad huffs. "Aren't you tired of just sitting on the couch and watching movies?"

*'It's **my** birthday.'*

A tiny twinge of nerves works its way up the back of Will's neck as soon as his hands stop moving. He shouldn't be so obstinate. He's been tiptoeing ever since his father caught him sneaking in the other night, careful not to set him off. Then again, Will's beginning to suspect that his old man was too drunk to remember the encounter, because so far nothing has come of it.

He holds his breath for just a beat, and then his father chuckles. Will tries to to smile back.

“Okay, Leslie Gore,” the older man teases, and waves him off. “You’re the boss. Now go hose off, and then I’ll take you to get somethin’ to eat. You look like I just fished you out of a river.”

Another weak grin, and Will is hiding himself away in the bathroom. He shuts the door, and almost instantly he deflates. The emotion that washes over him is caught somewhere between relief and simple, pure exhaustion. How much longer is he supposed to keep this up? He braces his palms against the counter top, head hanging low between his shoulders. The sigh he lets out is shaky, haggard. When he lifts his face, his expression stares back at him, dark around the eyes and damp with sweat.

-

“You know what they’re gnawing on, there?”

Will’s eyes are glued to the television, feasting on the grainy black-and-white footage with a fervor that matches the zombies on screen. He’s seen *Night of the Living Dead* at least a dozen times, but when his dad suggested it, Will plucked it happily from the video store shelf.

He forces himself to look away, lifts a curious brow. His dad smirks.

“Ham, covered in chocolate syrup.”

Will’s nose wrinkles, he looks back at the screen in disgust. *‘I think that’s actually grosser than eating human flesh,’* he signs, faking a gag, and his father laughs.

It’s actually been one of his better birthdays, all things considered. Nothing particularly dazzling, but there’s been almost no friction between them, which is a blessing. They’d gone to Huddle House for brunch, had waffles and bacon, coffees and waters.

Will doesn’t usually go for coffee. Caffeine doesn’t even work on him, something he’s heard is somewhat common among autistics, but he’d ordered it anyway. He liked mirroring his father’s order, naive as it was. Childishly pleased when he poured two packs of sweet-n-low into the mug and choked back the tar black liquid, because the man across from him was doing the same. Moments of genuine connection between them are so hard to come by, these days. Will often forgets that the two of them are meant to be the same *species* as one another, let alone father and child. Is it so wrong to manufacture an overlap, once in a while? To pretend?

The bulk of their afternoon was spent poking around aimlessly in various secondhand stores. Ambling down poorly kept aisles and peering into glass display cabinets, looking at guns, antique lighters, baseball cards. His dad eventually even dragged Will into the music shop near their apartment building, something he normally would’ve been excited about but now made his stomach turn. The woman from his last visit was there, manning the counter once more. If she recognized him, if she was offended that Will didn’t smile or say hello, Will

didn't know it. He kept his head down and his eyes averted until he was safely outside the store. It was uncomfortable, sure, but ultimately non-lethal.

So it's been better than he'd been expecting, so far. But *this* is the part he's really been looking forward to.

It all started when Will turned six, and his dad took him to a showing of *Raiders of the Lost Arc* even though he was way too young to really understand what was happening. It gave him nightmares for a month, but that didn't stop him from begging his father to take him to the movies for his next birthday. It's a tradition that Will takes much more seriously than his dad does, but Will tries not to dwell on that. It doesn't matter, not really. He's getting to see a movie, anyway. It doesn't matter that it was like pulling teeth to get his old man to sit down and watch it with him this year, when watching movies together used to be their *thing* when he was younger. It's fine.

"Shoulda got *Friday the 13th."*

Will's brows draw together. *'I don't like slashers that much,'* he argues.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," the older man sighs. "You're into Creature Features, I get it."

He shrugs. *'I just think it's boring that the killers are always just regular people.'*

"That's how it is in the real world though," his father says. "The sickos look like everybody else. You never see 'em coming, they just blend in."

Will scoffs, he can't help it. *'That's not how it is.'*

"No?"

Will looks sidelong at him. The white light flickers in the darkness, hits the hard planes of his father's face. It makes the hollows around his eyes stand out in stark relief. Will flashes a bitter little smile.

'Real monsters can't blend in, no matter what they do.'

His old man just nods slowly at that, taking a long swig of his beer. He eyes the bottle after, tilting it in his grip like he's gauging its fullness. There's definitely still liquid inside, but he stands and moves for the fridge anyway.

Will freezes up a minute later, suddenly face-to-face with a fresh bottle. His dad makes a show out of popping it open in front of him, the metal cap clinking emphatically to the floor. He swallows, hard, looking up at his father with a nervous frown.

"Go on," the man says, holding the beer out to Will expectantly. "Take it."

Will stares at it, searching desperately for something to say. A graceful refusal. Nothing comes to mind, so Will awkwardly signs *'I— I'm too young to drink.'*

His dad shrugs it off, unbothered. "You're seventeen, Willy, it's fine if you have one beer."

An anxious knot forms itself in his stomach, and he slowly shakes his head, shoulders drawing up around his ears of their own accord. *'I'm not thirsty.'*

"Just take it," his dad insists. Will sees how his jaw clenches, how his grip tightens around the bottle's neck. This is not a request. "It's your birthday, kid. Lighten up."

Will takes a shuddering breath of resignation, slowly wraps his fingers around the bottle. His father takes a seat on the couch beside him at that, evidently satisfied.

"You're always so damn serious," he mutters. Will bites the inside of his cheek. His dad plucks his own beer from its place of the coffee table, looks at Will and smiles approvingly. He clinks his bottle against the one in Will's hand. Will just watches.

He grasps for an appropriate toast for a moment, then says "To another year, huh?"

Will's throat closes up, overcome with revulsion. One more year. Just one more, and then it's over. His father takes a long drink, and Will knows that he's expected to do the same. He braces himself, takes a deep breath, and brings the bottle to his lips. The taste is revolting, but he forces himself not to make a face.

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It's four days later, when Will sneaks his way to the post office. He'd considered, more than once, whether his letters to Hannibal were even worth the risk now that he's been caught slipping out of the apartment. But every time, he comes to the same conclusion: He's not letting Hannibal go, no matter how dangerous it gets. If he gets caught sneaking out again, he'll deal with the fallout. He's far more scared of being alone again than he could ever be of his father.

The envelope that Caleb places in Will's hand is stuffed to bursting, filled with promises that Will fights to accept without getting overexcited. He half-runs down the sidewalk, tucking himself eagerly away into an alley. The paper casing parts beneath Will's hands, giving way to treasures within. Will's pulse starts racing.

Two sheets of paper, a store bought greeting card, and a small polaroid photograph. Eyes turning wide, Will grabs the photo, staring down at it like it's some ancient, sacred artwork. There, staring at the camera with a bright, wide grin, is Beverly Katz. Her hair is pulled back in a high ponytail, her dark eyes narrow around her smile. She's giving a peace sign with the hand not holding the camera. Will's heart lurches at the sight of her. He runs the pad of his thumb over her image, softly smiling back at her.

Behind Bev are three more figures. Brian, leaning in from the edge of the photo. Jimmy, craning over Bev's shoulder to be seen. And Hannibal. He looks into the camera with a shy, barely-there smile. His soft blonde hair falls into his face, partially covering one eye. To Will's surprise, he doesn't look at all out of place. Then again, Beverly has that welcoming quality to her. She's good at making people feel like they belong.

Will feels like he could melt, looking down at Hannibal's face. It's only been two months since they've seen one another, but it feels like it's been a lifetime. Longer than. He aches for

Hannibal, more than he's ever wanted for anything in his life. Even as he sinks, even as things turn darker with every passing day, Will finds that he only loves him more.

A car horn sounds, not far off, and Will jumps. It shocks him back to the present, reminds him that he's only got so much time until his father wakes. He spares one last stroke of his fingers over the faces of his friends, and then moves on.

One of the sheets inside is a letter from Hannibal. Will smiles to himself as he reads the lines, quickly on the first pass, and then slower. **'My Dearest Will,'** he writes. **'I hope you were able to enjoy your birthday. You deserve to be celebrated. In fact, if I had my say in the matter, you would be here right now, surrounded by those who love you. Unfortunately, I've been forced to settle for sending you mere reminders of them.**

I reached out to Beverly for you, I thought that you might enjoy a memento from her. She was thrilled to learn that we've been exchanging letters, and asks that you include a note for her in your next correspondence. In addition, Uncle bought you a card. I took it upon myself to have your friends sign it for you. And I know you aren't fond of gifts, but I'm afraid I couldn't help myself. I hope you understand.'

Will eyes the contents of the envelope warily, suddenly cautious at the words. The last thing he needs right now is another lavish gift. But the only things he sees inside are the greeting card and another piece of stationery.

'I would've liked to give you something a bit more extravagant, but I'm afraid you'll have to settle for something handmade this year. Then again, it was penned from my own heart, and I know you well enough by now to know that will make all the difference.

I love you, darling. More deeply than you could ever know. Happy Birthday.

With all my love,
-Your devoted Hannibal'

Will sighs. He adores those words. They set him at ease when nothing else will, make him feel human again. He could sit and absorb the lines forever, but his excitement gets the best of him. He grabs the second sheet of paper.

It's a poem. Four stanzas, carefully penned in neat, swooping letters. There's an apparent nervousness in the way that it's been written that Will notices immediately, a shy vulnerability that makes his chest turn tight. It resonates with him, before he can so much as read the first line. Hannibal's fragile, hopeful heart, reaching out for his own across miles and miles. Will reaches back.

'They speak of ghouls as lonely things,
Our presence too sour to sip upon,
Yet, we, of the night, note decadence in
The spirit of isolation

And they speak of me, Ghost, as he who haunts
Those places since left forgotten,
But I found my Beast, a faithful friend
in the spaces I never did wander.

I speak of myself as a rotten poet,
Soothing himself with bitter verse,
For I had to die to look at his face,
My Monster, my heart he has eaten.

Won't I speak of my soul, that angel boy?
His love too sweet for a sinner's tongue,
Yet, I can't deny I'd hoped to have been
The spirit he savored the taste of.'

Will clutches at his chest, wincing in pain. Something seizes him, a longing too powerful to fight and too deep to run from. He reads the poem again, again, his trembling fingers making small, accidental creases in the stationery. Hannibal's voice whispers through his head, sharing every line like a jealously guarded secret. Will's heart swells uncomfortably, the frame of his skeleton too small to contain his own desire. The feeling is so strong, so resonant within him, that he feels certain Hannibal can feel it, too. Yearning, connecting them like fleshy tissue between bones. He can almost feel Hannibal's breath catching in his own lungs, his pulse fluttering in Will's chest. He reads the poem again—

A man goes storming down the sidewalk, briefcase clutched in one hand. Will blinks. Work.

He flies back to the apartment building, lungs heaving as he races up the stairs without slowing. He barely resists the need to collapse when he finally opens the door, shutting it delicately behind him. By some miracle, the apartment is still silent. Will creeps to his bedroom, holding his breath whenever the floors shift beneath his weight.

The moment he enters his room and toes off his shoes, Will lets out a heavy sigh of relief. He grabs the decoy copy of *'Jekyll and Hyde'* from his bedside drawer, carefully stashes the polaroid, poem and letter within. He smooths down the pages, unbearably fond. These are the contents of his heart, gathered together in one place. A shrine, of sorts, housed between hardcovers.

It's only when he opens the envelope to store his new treasures that he remembers his card. A little guilt stirs in him, apologetic that he'd been so wrapped up in Hannibal's poem that he'd completely neglected the cheerful token still waiting to be opened.

The card itself is simple. The words **'Best Wishes'** in big swoopy letters and an illustration of sunflowers on the front. The corner of Will's mouth quirks upward. It was sweet of Robertus, to send him a birthday card. Unexpected. A plume of warm affection rises in Will as he flips it open.

He's not expecting anything but writing to be inside, so he gasps when something falls out. It lands on the floor, near the toe of his sneaker. The tiny paper *pap* of it falling echoes in his

ears. Money, folded up into an unassuming little green square. Will bends, plucks it from the floor, unfolds it.

In his hands lies a single hundred-dollar bill.

Will chokes. It's an astounding sum of money, almost obscene against his fingers. It takes him several moments to do anything more than just stare at it, Benjamin Franklin's drawn face looking sternly back at him.

Searching for answers, he looks to the inside of the card. There's a pre-written message inside, one that he almost entirely ignores. Some one-size-fits-all congratulations on another trip around the sun. Instead, his gaze locks on to the handwritten text.

True to his word, Hannibal had amassed Will quite a few well-wishes. Margot, Alana and Hannibal himself, all written in different colored inks. Bev, Jimmy and Brian, visibly scribbled with ink from the same shared pen. And finally, a note from Robertus himself.

'Don't be afraid to use this, if the need should arise. It's yours, you don't need anyone's permission. It pains me to think of you going without.
Happy Birthday,
-Robertus'

Will looks from the words to the money in his hand and back again, increasingly bewildered as he struggles to wrap his mind around what he's seeing. *This can't be real,* he thinks, holding the bill to the morning sunlight through his window. He doesn't actually know how to spot fake money, but his baffled mind demands that he do it anyway. A hundred dollars? Just sitting here, in his hands? It can't be right.

The disbelief morphs almost instantly into guilt and fear. What could Will have possibly done for Robertus to think he deserved so much money? How could he be worthy of such a generous gift? ...Is this a test? Should he send it back, say *no, thank you, but I can't?* Surely, that's the correct answer. Send it back, like you never even touched it. Don't make them think you're selfish, not after everything they've done for you.

The sound of a mattress groaning in the next room puts all of his deliberation to rest, for the moment. Thinking as quickly as he can, Will folds the bill up as small as possible, picks up one foot, and shoves it down into his sock. The card gets hastily stuffed into the false book, the envelope along with it until Will gets a chance to dispose of it.

"What are you doing?"

Will flinches, muscles drawn so tight he feels like he might snap. He turns, forcing the most casual look he can. *'Reading,'* he replies, then holds up the copy of *'Jekyll and Hyde'* for emphasis.

His father looks him up and down, scrutinizing. Whether his eyes are narrowed with suspicion or simply the strength of his hangover, Will can't say.

He must not care enough to prod further, though, because he simply nods and gestures for Will to get moving. “Well come on, we’ve gotta get ready for work. You can read when we get back.”

Will nods sharply. *‘Yes, sir,’* he replies, and scrambles to hide the book away. He pulls his shoes on, flexing his foot where the hidden riches rub against his sole.

“Summer’s getting away from me,” his father grunts, yawning as he pours coffee grounds into the machine. “Time’s going by too fast.”

Will hums an affirmative, although in his opinion it can’t possibly move fast enough. One more year.

“You’ll be starting school before you know it.”

He nods, even though his father isn’t looking at him. Shockingly, the idea of being the new kid in high school for the twelfth time sounds like a relief. At least during the school year, he’s able to wriggle out of his father’s line of sight. He’s never felt so suffocated as he has this Summer.

“And you’ll start seeing Doctor Du Maurier,” his father adds, and Will bites his lip to keep from groaning. Every time he starts to hope that his old man’s changed his mind, or forgotten, he brings her up again. He looks up at Will, the coffee machine starts brewing and fills the apartment with its rich, dark scent. Will’s father smiles. “Maybe someday soon you and me can have a real conversation, eh? Won’t that be nice? Just talking like normal people?”

Will sighs. The words stab at something in his stomach, something raw and tender. He forces a tired smile of his own. *‘Yeah,’* he signs back. *‘Yeah, that would actually be... really great.’*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so SO much to my dear friend kitsunei, who wrote the poem included in this chapter, titled 'favourite spirit'!!! She wrote it about this fic like... 2 years ago??? lol. and i immediately asked her if i could use it for this chapter (yes, ive had this chapter planned for that long). I was SO excited to have a poem that could be from han in this story, because uh. much like will, im a little inexperienced with writing poetry, and kitsunei CLEARLY knows what shes doing hahah. anyway, if you liked the poem, all the credit goes to her<3

also YES will is canonically a cancer i said what i said
much love!
-SW<3

The Modern Prometheus

Chapter Notes

eeeee im so excited about this chapter but also nervous about it so please let me know what you think! theres about... 5? chapters left after this, i think? so we're in the home stretch!

ALSO uh this chapter is kind of.... a lot? I think if you've managed to read everything else this far you should be fine but i would definitely not recommend reading this if youre like. at work or right before bed because i KNOW yall do that lol. its probably the most intense chapter in the fic so. hey! its all downhill from here?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he was a little boy, maybe five or six, Will and his dad were working at a boatyard out on Lake Erie. He couldn't do much beyond watch and hold things, but that didn't matter to him. His father was the center of his universe, back then. He'd just been pleased to be there. After all, how many kids got to say that they went to work with their Daddies every day?

He'd been standing there, bouncing on his feet, trying to stand up straight and look serious, when a splash in the water caught his attention. It was a fish, a big one by the looks of it, its wet scales glimmering in the sunlight as if to tempt him. Will leaned over to get a closer look, and the next thing he knew, he was underwater.

He remembers it being freezing, the first timid touches of Spring not nearly enough to warm the lake. Will wanted to flail, to fight his way to the surface, but he couldn't. He just froze up, terrified, and watched the sunlight slowly drift further from view.

In reality, he couldn't have been in the water for more than a few seconds. He felt another splash nearby, a huge one that shook the lake, and the next moment there were big arms wrapping around his stomach.

His dad dragged him out of the water, coughing and spluttering and crying, and set him safely back on the dock. When his father sat heavily beside him, Will noticed that he still had his work boots on. He'd dove in without even taking his shoes off first.

Will watched through his tears as his dad tried unsuccessfully to wipe the water from his face, his chest rising and falling hard as he stared down at the lake, then at Will.

"You've gotta be more careful, Willy," he'd said, and Will hiccuped around a sob.

'I'm sorry,' he'd signed with a shivering hand, and some of the severity in his father's face smoothed away.

He reached out, squeezed Will's tiny shoulder. His hand seemed to swallow Will up whenever he touched him, like Will could just hide behind his palm and never be seen again. "Hey, don't cry, alright? You're okay, it was just scary. You don't need to cry."

Will nodded, and bit his lip to keep it from wobbling. His dad stood up, offered Will a hand, and helped him to his feet.

"Come on. Let's go get you warm."

He'd walked back along that dock, staring up at Bill Graham like he was the God damned sun. Larger than life, bigger than anything Will could ever be afraid of in the whole wide world.

Will purses his lips, stares out at the water, casts his line. The fragile synthetic strand floats through the air, suspended for just a moment, before his bait lands square in the center of the river. Will squints through the light, flicks his hair to the side. What he'd give to have one of Bev's scrunchies right now.

He's more or less given up on ocean fishing. It's not that it's difficult— if anything, fishing in the sea is a simpler, dumber version of the sport. Freshwater fishing requires strategy, finesse. You have to know what you're looking for, and how to get it, and when. Saltwater fish will eat anything, it's not as satisfying.

He sighs, watching how the current parts around the smoothed peaks of a few large rocks just downstream. It's not about the fishing, really. Not the beach, or even the crowds surrounding it, that led him inland to the nearest river he could find.

The air is less salty, here. At least somewhat. It feels like the sea has infested his lungs, somehow. It clings to his skin like a crust, something he can't scrub off and can't claw away. Every breath of it stings, tiny pinpricks that build and build until he has to cover his nose with his hands. Particles of longing, aching mouthfuls of briny, bleeding *want* that constantly remind him of how crushingly far he is from home.

Will's been spending more and more time here. As the Summer drags on, as the days nip and gnaw at him, his heart leads him back to the river every chance it gets. He's like a transplanted organ, severed from some unknown larger host, one that he'll always feel bound to. His body knows, in this instinctive, animal sort of way, that this isn't where he belongs.

Maybe Frankenstein's creature feels that same tugging at his stitches, from time to time. An invisible weight that drags him down, a thousand phantom limbs. His body built from loss, something that must choose between being *itself* and being *whole.* Do the disparate pieces of himself each long to emancipate, to drag themselves back to their graves and burrow inside again? Is there any part of the creature that isn't cursed by that awful, constant longing?

A truck approaches, speeding down the road not far off. Will expects it to whiz on by, but instead it veers wildly toward him, tearing through the grass at a frightening speed. The blood drains from his face as the vehicle comes to a wailing, groaning halt mere yards from where he's standing. His father's truck.

The door swings open, a worn old boot strikes the earth. Will feels something sink, way down deep in his core. Dread like twigs snapping, like rustling in the brush when you're lost in the dark. There's a drunken stagger in his old man's gait, a fire like nothing Will's ever seen before in his ever-weary eyes. He walks toward Will with purpose, one fist clenched at his side so tightly that the veins rise up around his knuckles. In his other hand, clutched like his father means to crush it, is a book. Will doesn't need to see the cover to know what it is.

Jekyll and Hyde.

Will's heart begins to hammer at his ribs, cool sweat prickles in the space between his shoulder blades. A voice in his head speaks up, the frantic whisperings of a child hiding from the bogeyman. It says *'Run.'*

But his legs won't move. He's rooted to the spot, fishing rod slipping into the water as he fumbles to face the only thing he's ever truly feared. His father stops a handful of paces away, staring at him with this crazed, untethered look on his face. Eyes pinned to Will's, he lifts the book, holding it to the light like he wants to show it off.

His voice is flat as a lake when he speaks, the water of him too dark to see how deep it truly goes.

"How long."

That petrified child still clinging to his brain stem starts to panic. It begs him to babble, to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. His hands itch to eke out excuses, all *Please, Daddy, it's not how it looks.*

'Does it matter?' he asks.

He barely gets a chance to register that something is moving before the sturdy cover of *Jekyll and Hyde* is slamming spine-first into his mouth. The blunt instruments of his teeth sink into the insides of his lips, something hard catches on his gums. The cover smacks his nose, sends a dull throb over his face from the center outward. Will watches the book fall to the ground in a heap, its hidden contents sprawled out like gore. He stares dumbly at the delicate script, his stomach turning at the sight of it. **'With all my love,'** it croaks, dying at his feet. **'Your devoted Hannibal.'**

"I said how long has this shit been going on!" his father demands.

Will looks at him, hands covering his mouth as it starts to fill with blood. Shaking, with pink stained fingers, he signs *'...I don't know. A long time.'*

The disgust on his father's face isn't new, but still stabs him in the gut like he's never seen it before. His dad shakes his head, closes in on him. Will has another hind-brain urge to dive into the river and just start swimming.

"Seventeen years," his father says. One of his eyelids twitches, Will can smell the beer on his breath. "Seventeen fucking years, I've been trying to help you! Those doctors Lottie dragged

you to talked about you like you were some kind of circus freak, and I didn't listen, because I thought that if I taught you how to be a man, you'd be alright. I thought I could fix you!"

'I never asked you to fix me!' His dad is starting to turn red in the face.

"No, you wanna be a fucking faggot!"

Will winces when his father kicks the book into the river, the ink of Hannibal's letters bleeding away in seconds. His eyes stay locked on the rapidly disintegrating sentiments until he's shoved backward by his shoulders. Will stumbles into the river with the force of it, water seeps into his shoes as his father comes to loom over him.

"Did you let him fuck you, huh?" he demands, and before Will can so much as process the question he's being struck hard across his face. Will groans, ducking his head as his vision swirls.

"You let him put his fucking dick in you, you sick little pervert?"

Will shrinks back from the blow he knows is coming next. He trips over his fallen fishing rod, lands on his ass in the river. The water is quick, unseasonably cold. Every piece of him curls inward. *'I'm not sick,'* he signs. It's the only thing he can think to say. His father isn't listening.

The silver chain bites into Will's nape when his father snatches the Baltic amber from its place around his neck. He pulls until the delicate links snap under the pressure, his fist curled around the stone.

Will scrambles, struggling to his knees in the water as he grasps for the amber. Stupid, that's the word bouncing off the walls of his skull right now. Stupid for keeping the letters in his room, stupid for *not* keeping the necklace there, stupid for wanting to hold onto these tiny reminders of his personhood like they'd ever give him anything but suffering.

'Give that back!'

"I thought if I could get you away from those nutcase kids in Louisiana, you'd be okay. Thought maybe you weren't too far gone yet. But they were never the problem! It's always been *you!"*

Will tries to stand, but his father's boot is faster. His steel toe makes contact with Will's sternum, knocks the air from his lungs and leaves him gasping. Will falls back, catching himself on his palms before his spine can find the river's floor. He kicks Will in the stomach, this time, and a strange, animal wheeze crawls from him.

'Dad,' he fumbles to say. There's bile in his throat, it burns when he breathes. *'Dad, stop!'*

"You're not my fucking *son!"*

Will accidentally sucks in a gulp of water when his dad shoves him down, tackling him into the river. He coughs, his father leans over him, crushing Will with all his weight into the rocky, silty riverbed. Far off, Will thinks he hears a bird, calling out in the hopes of being

heard by another. He gazes up at his father, sees the shine of spit on his teeth, the whites of his eyes.

“No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try to help you…”

Will struggles, writhing in the water like a fish on a line. He kicks and flails, splashing wildly. All it does is leave him tired.

He grabs Will by the face, crushing his jaw in one wide, brutal hand. He looks Will in the eye, burning with all the fury, the contempt, all the *hatred* that Will’s felt his entire life.

“You’re nothing but a dirty, disgusting little monster!”

He shoves Will under the water, then, grinding his cheek painfully into the ground. Bubbles fly from his mouth, his nose. His father’s hand is tangled up in the knotted mess of his hair. With his heart pounding like this, his lungs start to burn in seconds. He reaches up, fights with all his remaining strength to shove at the arms holding him down. His father’s other hand pins him by the chest. When pushing doesn’t work, Will starts to claw at him.

Will’s chest spasms. Every cell in his body begs him to open his mouth, to breathe. The heel of his creator’s palm forces the meat of his cheek hard against his own teeth, it feels like one of them might snap loose. Will’s hands turn clumsy, dumb. He can’t feel his fingers.

Eyes rolling, Will looks up through the haze of water. It’s late afternoon, the sun is mere minutes away from ducking behind the trees. It’s bright, warm. It feels wrong, Will thinks, seeing the sun right now.

In scary movies, people get killed in the dark. You’re not supposed to die in broad daylight.

Helpless, he caves to the pressure. His body forces him to gasp, sucking water down his throat. Will paws at the arm pinning his chest for another moment, then his hand slips down. His vision is going dark around the edges. He wraps his hand around his father’s wrist, he squeezes. The gurgling of the river sounds like his mother’s voice.

Will lets his other arm fall limp, landing with a splash into the river. His hand comes to rest among the stones.

His lids flutter. He sees a forest, blurry but lush and tranquil. A dog runs ahead of him, a pit bull with big paws and grey fur. It bounds down a trail with its tail wagging and its tongue lolling out. There’s someone with him, someone who takes his hand. Will’s entire body jolts, his heart feels like it’s tearing itself to pieces.

Fumbling, frantic, his hand finds a worn, river-smooth stone, a bit larger than his palm. Will furrows his brow, grits his aching teeth. With all his might, he swings.

The stone finds his father’s temple with a crack so tremendous that it shoots back up Will’s arm. The hold on him falters, and Will flings himself forward.

He’s still hacking up water as he flips their positions, his brain high on adrenaline and reeling from the rush of oxygen. Will’s father stares up at him with wide, dazed eyes. His mouth

gapes, there's blood gushing from his skull, a rusty trail carried away by the river's current. Will raises the rock high above his head, brings it down as hard as he can.

Again.

Again.

On the third strike, his grip on the rock slips, his hand turned slick with blood. It falls into the water, pain throbs its way up Will's arm, he heaves for breath.

Will screams.

Everything is still. He's on his hands and knees in the river, the ends of his hair kissing the water. He screams like he's never screamed before, he screams until he's lightheaded and his throat feels like barbed wire. He sobs raggedly, his stomach lurches and he vomits into the water. Belatedly, he realizes that there are scorching tears streaming down his face, carving lines of fire down his freezing skin.

The cries taper off. Will's voice dies in his throat, turns to sobs and then to whimpers and then to nothing at all. The rush of survival leaks from him, leaves him aching all over and more tired than he's ever been in his life. He spits blood and bile into the water, gingerly prods at his beaten ribs. More than anything, he wants to fall asleep right now. To curl up in a ball, right beside his father's corpse, and sleep until it all goes away. He wants to wake up and realize that all of this was just another nightmare, to shake it off and know it wasn't real.

Not far from where he's knelt in the water, something glitters in the light of the steadily retreating sun. Too exhausted to stand, he crawls to it, blinking through the endless tide of his tears. He scoops it up, holds it in a trembling hand with a few pebbles and a palm full of silt.

The silver chain is nowhere to be seen, but the Baltic amber isn't much worse for wear. It must've gotten stuck, wedged in among the larger rocks before it could float further downstream. He looks into the stone's honeyed depths, gold and brown and fiery, and his fingers close around it.

Chapter End Notes

> "I have love in me the likes of which you can scarcely imagine, the rage the likes of which you would not believe. If I cannot satisfy the one, I will indulge the other." -Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

The Prodigal Son

Chapter Notes

Eeeeeeeee. No further comments

He's halfway to the Georgia border before Will lets himself think. Before that his thoughts are all coated in a thick fog of white, obscured but easily guessed at like the shape of a dead body beneath a linen sheet. It keeps him in something like a trance for the first couple hours of driving. He can't internalize the throbbing pain blazing through his entire body, or the dry lump of his tongue, or the foul taste in his mouth. It all just glances off, gets lost in the floorboards of the truck like stale old chip crumbs.

Instead Will just drives. He grips the steering wheel like he means to snap it in two, his fingers deathly pale and trembling all the while. There's little specks of blood caught in the creases of his knuckles, the beds of his nails. He observes it in fleeting glimpses, like he's scared to get caught looking. He's too numb to conjure any actual emotion at the sight, though. The fear is something that lives at the back of his skull, for the moment. A beaten dog chained up to the iron post of his spinal cord.

It's not so bad. There's horror buried underneath it, of course, a panicked hand flailing beneath the sheet. But on the surface, it's surprisingly tranquil. A pleasant kind of nothing, one that fills his head with a soft, weird buzzing sound. It won't go away. Will's not sure he wants it to.

And then somewhere near Allendale his jaw starts burning.

It's sharper than a burn, though. Meaner. More like he's been chewing on broken glass for the past three hours. Will opens his mouth, tries to work the screaming muscle back and forth, and realizes that he'd been clenching his jaw tight enough to crack a tooth. He pulls a hand from the wheel to press against his jaw, and the spell he's been under all this time shatters without warning.

His hands seize up painfully, he dares to graze a single fingertip over the bridge of his nose and his vision goes white for a second. The blows he'd taken to his chest and stomach lurch suddenly to life, and Will swerves. He manages to pull off to the edge of the highway despite the wild spinning of his head, puts the truck in park. It's just before sunset, the Western sky is painted in bold strokes of vibrant orange and blush pink. Cars blur past him, each of them glinting like treasure in the gloriously dying light.

Not a moment after the soles of his sneakers find asphalt, Will doubles over. One hand braces itself on his bruised kneecap, the other pushes back the thick wall of his hair. He vomits on

the highway shoulder, shudders, vomits again. His eyes water, he spits and the taste makes him wretch.

Will slumps against the body of the truck, sickly pale and dripping with sweat. His breaths echo in his ears, strain the delicate flesh of his lungs. He tips his head back, watches the sky for a moment while he waits for his skull to stop pulsing.

'Distgusting,' the buried voice sneers, and Will winces. He shakes his head, sucks a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth.

'Dirty, disgusting little monster. You're not nothing but a dirty monster. You're disgusting, Will, disgusting. You're-'

The smack to the back of his skull hurts his arm more than his head, weirdly— shoots cruel and sharp up to his shoulder from the point of contact. Can't think about that, Willy. Not right now. Maybe not ever. Right now, you've got one thing you need to do, and that's to get your ass back into that God damned truck and *drive.*

Will nods to himself, gulps down a couple more shaky breaths, and lifts one of his feet. One of the few solid thoughts that'd been allowed to pass through the white barrier had been that the fuel gauge was a lot closer to 'E' than he'd like. He needs to stop for gas, soon.

The inside of his sneaker is still damp, all of him is. The hundred-dollar bill is waterlogged and wadded up like chewed gum. Will plucks it out, tries to stretch it flat again. When he hauls himself back into the truck, he cranks the knob of the barely-functional AC and turns all the vents onto where the bill sits pinned in the passenger's seat. Then he sets his eyes on the road ahead, takes one more deep breath, and pulls back onto the highway.

-

"Sorry, can't take that."

Will stares at the gas station clerk, letting all of his exhaustion bleed through into his expression. *'Why the hell not? It's fucking money, isn't it?'*

The clerk isn't moved by Will's impassioned display, totally deaf to his plight. He huffs, taps a sign on his register, and slowly shouts what's written on it. "No large bills! Okay? You got that?"

Will rolls his eyes, then snatches a newspaper from where they're stacked near the door and a pen from its place near the register. **'Look, this is all I have,'** he scrawls in the margin, and the guy gives him a sarcastic shrug.

"Then you can't buy gas in here, kid!"

His hands curl into firsts, release, curl again. He wants to explode, to punch the counter and start screaming. He wants to cry. Red faced and teetering on the edge of a meltdown, he steps back and makes for the exit.

"Hey, wait up a minute!"

Will stops with one hand on the door, and turns to find an older man with a trucker hat looking back at him.

"All you got's a hundred, is that right?"

He grips the handle tighter, gets ready to bolt. The man reaches into his wallet and produces a fistful of bills, a confusion of twenties, tens and fives.

"Well I've got about ninety, here, I think," he says, and thumbs through it to double-check. "I'd be shorting you ten bucks, but at least you'd be able to use it."

Will stares up at him for a moment, searching his round face for signs of malicious intent. He comes up empty, but his overwrought nerves still scream for him to turn tail and run.

The man urges the money closer to Will's chest. "Go on, take it," he insists. "Looks like you need it."

Will swallows. He takes the bills slowly, like he's expecting them to come to life and bite his fingers at any moment. He gives Robertus' hundred to him in return. After nearly a month walking around with it under his foot, it feels oddly sad to part with it. But the money in his hand can be used to buy gas, which means he can keep driving. The only thing he needs to do tonight is drive.

'Thanks,' Will signs, and the man looks like he gets the meaning.

"Listen, kid," he says, then hesitates for a moment. He stalls by shoving his wallet into the pocket of his jeans, then fixes him with a hard look. "...You okay?"

Will's used to shrugging off that question. He's been doing it for seventeen years, now. But tonight he suddenly can't take it. His lower lip wobbles a little, a fresh wave of pain washes through the ruined flesh of his mouth, makes his cheek throb where his teeth had been ground into its meat.

"You want me to call somebody for you?" the good Samaritan asks, eyes all gentle with pity. "I'm sure your parents are worried about ya. I know I'd be worried about my kid."

Monster.

Will feels bile rise in his throat, stinging tears prick at his eyes. As quickly as he can, he slips out the door and runs to the truck. His hands shake violently against the wheel as he drives away.

He stops at the next gas station down the road. Nobody tries to talk to him, this time. He buys a full tank of gas and a pack of Doublemint gun to chase away the taste of vomit. He keeps driving.

-

The first thing that'd passed through the white sheet had been the pain. And evidently it wasn't interested in diving back under the covers, because Will has never hurt this badly in

his entire life. The tension isn't helping, of course, winding every one of his muscles up tight enough that he feels like he could snap into a million pieces. Worse still, a savage kind of tiredness has been creeping up on him for hours now. It isn't the kind of tiredness that comes from wanting to *sleep— hell* no, Will doubts he'll ever relax enough to fall asleep again. Instead it's a weird, manic tiredness. The kind of tiredness that makes you see things that aren't there, think thoughts that aren't yours.

The second thing that passes through is paranoia. It doesn't occur to him until several hours later, in the brutal dead of night when nothing exists but the white dashes on the highway. But once it does, it manages to eclipse even the pain.

The police might be looking for him.

It's not likely. That's what he keeps telling himself with increasing fervor. Bill Graham is— *was, God, this can't be real, please let this be a nightmare—* a lifetime drifter, independently employed, a friend to no one. His body is in a secluded place, odds are good that no one will find it for another few days. And even then, he was drunk, killed by a blow to the head. That happens, doesn't it? Alcoholics, they fall and hit their heads all the time, right?

Will blows out a long breath to keep himself from dry heaving.

You're talking about getting away with murder, right now. You know that, don't you?

That's the third thought that slips through.

This isn't some stupid movie this time, okay? You did this. Murder, Willy. You fucking killed him. And now you want to get away with it? You're sick, you're fucking sick.

This time when he hits himself it hurts where it's supposed to, a sharp thumping just above his right eye. The pain in his arm is just a bonus.

-

It's early morning when Will finally stops driving. The countless disparate pains have homogenized, now— joined into one great tender mass in the exact size and shape of his body. His hands still clutch at the wheel, even in park. He's scared to let go.

Will dares a glance at the front door. He observes the slight gloss of its red paint, the tiny yellow light above it. Looking at it inspires a new twinge of pain, one that stands out from the crowd. An ache, deep in the pit of his chest.

He looks at his reflection in the truck's rearview mirror, and what he sees makes him recoil. It's the exhaustion, he reasons, or maybe the stress. That doesn't stop him from jumping in fear.

Staring back at him is a shadow. A quivering, inky thing, pitch dark save for huge, terrified eyes. It's haunting. Will's never seen a creature look so lonely, so helpless, so afraid.

And then he blinks, and the shadow is gone. The thing that replaces it isn't much better, to be honest. Will's hair is bedraggled, hanging in dark strings over his face. His eyes are bleary

and rimmed with red, dark like he hasn't slept in days. His nose is a swollen, purple lump in the center of his face. His mouth is only visibly torn in one place, near the center of his upper lip, but Will's felt with his own tongue that the internal damage is much worse. He shudders to think about what lies beneath his shirt, what mottled landscape of bruises is hiding just out of view.

It's the first time he's dared to look at himself, and it immediately makes him understand why that trucker had been so worried about him. Will looks every bit like he's been beaten within an inch of his life. His stomach lurches.

There won't be any lying about this, not this time. He can't hide anymore, and the only place he'd ever want to run to is right here.

Another lingering glance at the sleeping house. It looks so peaceful, like this. Safe. Guilt bubbles up in him at the idea of disturbing it. Briefly, he entertains the idea of driving away.

Slowly, Will pries his hands from the steering wheel. He sighs, shuts the engine off, and gets out of the truck. The walk to the front door feels longer than it ever has, somehow. Every step is its own feat of mind over matter, it's a fucking miracle that he makes it to the welcome mat.

He's weirdly calm as he knocks. Resting in the space between despair and relief, he supposes. Anticipating.

It's so quiet that he can hear the footsteps approaching on the other side of the door. That's what wakes his heart up. It sets to galloping in him like a frightened horse. The breath stalls in his throat, he realizes a moment too late that he has no clue how to stand. Should he look ashamed, get on his knees and beg for help? Should he smile?

As it turns out, he has no choice in that matter.

The front door swings open. Everything goes unnervingly silent in Will's head. For a second or two, Hannibal's expression is neutral, even sleepy. And then he sees Will.

Will's battered mouth breaks into a messy grin. Hannibal's eyes blow wide, seemingly holding every emotion at once in their perfect depths. Relief, adoration, worry, fear.

"Will," he breathes, and the sound of that voice after months thinking he might never hear it again is enough to make Will collapse.

Hannibal is frozen, at first— too shocked to move until Will's arms are already folding themselves tight around his shoulders. For a single, agonizing beat, Hannibal is startled entirely still. Will rests his tender face in the crook of Hannibal's neck, nestles against him, savors his gentle warmth.

Hannibal sobs.

He gathers Will up in his embrace, clutches at him hard like a child. It's the only time Will's ever heard him cry like this, ugly and hiccupping and raw. He's a kid all over again, Will

realizes. Or never stopped being one. Just a scared little boy who doesn't want to lose anybody else.

Hannibal's fingers dig into Will's back, claw at the sore planes of his shoulder blades. It hurts, but Will doesn't stop him.

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